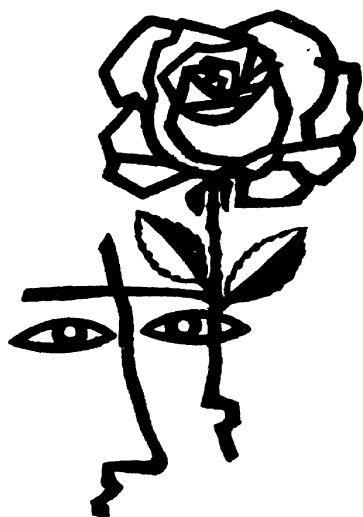


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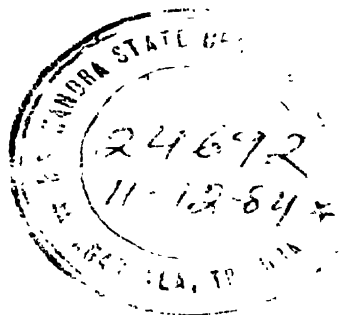
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# THE MORNING AFTER

A NON-NOVEL

CHANAKYA SEN



**ACADEMIC PUBLISHERS**

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# ***Introduction***

This non-Novel is based on my first Bengali fiction *Rajpath Janpath*, (Nava-Bharati, Calcutta, 1960), but is not even remotely a translation. *Rajpath Janpath* was an immediate success, and has run into ten printings, most probably because it was the first attempt in Bengali, since India's independence, to write a serious political novel. Many readers suggested an English translation. One of them, Dr. B. Ghosh, an agricultural engineer then working in Nairobi, went to the extent of sending me a complete English translation. To him and others who have helped in this final re-writing of the novel in English, I take this occasion to record my sincere gratitude.

Chanakya Sen



# ONE

Imperialism has gone, hasn't it?, Asia and Africa are awake, aren't they?, come together, stand together, fight together, no? wasn't it a nice thought in this pink and gold evening in New Delhi? wasn't that crimson sky symbolic of young golden hopes in countless brown, yellow, black nonwhite, antiwhite hearts? and this large, ugly house, like a frown on a strange forehead, so unhospitably quiet, surrounded by trees and creepers and green, yes, green grass, and my god, who's she? isn't she the girl he had seen in the university? and why was she coming into this house in this pink and gold evening, the crimson sky spanning Asia and Africa, she, avoiding the taxi with a wobble and a lurch, swooping through the white gate, jumping off her bicycle with a bound, shipping toward him, her breasts billowing like sails . . .

Solomon Kuchiro was confused, an unknown fear clutching at his throat, as he looked at her and tried to sport a smile. She watched him with eyes that hit him from all sides with a volley of invisible balls. He fumbled in his pockets for loose coins. He paid his fare and the taxi drove off, a wreckage of minor explosions. He brought his palms together in a very Indian *namaste*, while a girlish snigger chattered through her head, and she asked herself whether he was ferocious, uncivilized, was he? was he? with his ebony face, hewn, huge sloping forehead, waspish yellow eyes, did he practice witchcraft and dance naked around a fire? He bared his white shining teeth and said, "I'm Solomon Kuchiro," gravely, with all seriousness that Africa could command. "I'm Sheila," she replied, softly, like a substantial gazelle (he thought), giving all courtesies that Africa could demand.

"I've come. . ."

"Oh, yes, I know. You are our new guest." She was now quite enjoying the event of their, her parents', African guest standing in front of the house, unreceived. "I live here. Please come in."

He was pleased with his welcome. The fear left. Instead, he felt a different sensation in his throat. Words.

"I think I've seen you before," he lifted his suitcase, and was ready to follow her into the house.

"I think I've seen you too. At the university."

At this point the lady of the house arrived upon the scene. Sulochana, wife of Shukdev Sharma, mother of Sheila. She had been watching the African guest from behind the curtains of the living room. She was getting ready to come out to receive him, when what should not have happened, happened, as it always did in this unkind world. Sheila should not have met this stranger from Africa, and she did. Sulochana read in this happening an evil omen, and at once decided to send for the priest to offer a special *pūja* at the Hanumanji temple. Moving with unusual speed she planted herself between her daughter and the stranger, and introduced herself.

Solomon again folded his hands, thinking of tabernacle and a lingam, and said, "I got a little delayed. I hope it's not too late."

Sheila stepped behind to allow her mother to lead Solomon into the house. She noticed the strong sign of disapproval on her mother's face, and murmured, "I thought Daddy had gone to pick him up."

Sulochana ignored her daughter, and spoke to Solomon.

She was now in control of her confusion. "Oh, that's all right," she said, in as friendly a voice as she could master in the circumstances, but without a smile. "It doesn't matter at all. You're not very late. I am sorry my husband could not pick you up. He is a very busy man. He will be home very shortly."

Very shortly, quite soon, in no time at all, why is he not here, and why should I have to face all problems alone, all by myself, look at his hair, like a long rush broom, hasn't he ever heard of a barber, it is their custom perhaps to have such long hair? She fumed with trivial anger. Her husband had sent a

message that he would be delayed—called by the hon'ble minister at the last moment—and that he would not be able to fetch their Negro guest who would now be coming on his own and would she cope with him until he got home.

Sulochana looked at her daughter. Looked at her looking at the long-limbed natural man with hurricane hair. Sulochana frowned sternly, and motioned her shameless daughter to disappear immediately. And then, removing the frown, she spoke to the man, "Please come in."

They went from the verandah into the cool hallway, their talk clashing like two deaf dwarfs blowing trumpets.

"Would you like to wash and unpack?" she asked. "The servant will show you your room. You will find it comfortable. My husband will be in any moment now."

Delhi, old and new, from the highest layers. A bird's eye-view, laid out in squares and oblongs of flat white-washed linen, small snow tiles of white heat in a maze of bureaucrats and diplomats and politicians and their minions. At the edge of the desert from where at night the camel carts come with their caged sides and gossip spreads like algae in a stale pond.

Rajpath, Janpath. Still better known by their old names, Kingsway, and Queensway. Two roads on which brown and browner people move. Raj, the rulers, and Jan, the reproducing mass who is ruled. One is the path of power, where all sights are set; the other, the source and victim of that power. For centuries the two hardly ever met except as strangers. Now they meet, collide and collude still very largely as strangers.

Rajpath and Janpath move side by side, sniffing at each other, separated, branching into different species. Crossing only at rare intersections. But one cannot exist without the other. They live in symbiosis, and exposed. Janpath is the massive body of the host, giving the torpid energy for the proclaimed glory of Rajpath. Rajpath, the parasite on the body of Janpath, draws the necessary juices for power and paternity.

From the jeweled center of Delhi, colonies spread for miles after mile, soulless, treeless, vibrating with heat.

The people of Rajpath are carried about like frogs in the back of large cars with badges, baubles and drivers. The people of Janpath slug along in droves and shaols, on bicycles, in overcrowded buses, streaming in toward the Great Place in the morning, and streaming out, ink stained, with empty lunch boxes in the evening.

The people of Rajpath sit in large offices, carpeted and furnished in opulent taste, with photographs of contemporary heroes. Paternal, eternal and smug.

The people of Janpath sit in their offices, eating peanuts or radishes according to the season. Twenty to a room often, tables so close together that they cannot mind their own business even when they want to. Dusty tables, drawers, shelves and tops of cupboards, with floors even, piled high with files, ledgers and paper. Pale, fat files bound with red tape. They push the files about, peer, copy, sign, sit on shaky chairs without arm-rests or hope. And so confined they wait for annual increments in their salaries, promotions, quasi-permanancies and permanancies, and they day-dream, and sigh. Janpath pretends to do the work. Rajpath pretends to get the work done.

Into one of the houses off *Rajpath*, Solomon Kuchiro had been invited as a guest for a few days. The master of the house, motivated by liberal policies and high ideals, had decided to entertain an African in his home.

Shukdev Sharma was a man of prestige, a conscientious man conscious of prestige. He was an important civil servant, being a senior member of the Indian Civil Service, over-worked, over-privileged, a vital spring in the government machinery. He was also conscious of the prestige of his country by which he meant very largely the government. It was therefore necessary to give the right impression not only to the people of his own country but also to the people of other countries. That meant, in part, foreign visitors visiting the capital of India, whether for a week or for a year.

Shukdev Sharma was not quite comfortable at the breakfast table that morning. The paper lay unread on his lap. He was too preoccupied to give any attention to the breakfast which the white-coated bearer silently unfolded before him. His wife,

sensing her husband's preoccupation, was nervously buttering some toast.

Sheila was attacking her boiled egg with exemplary concentration, levering the top of her egg with a monogrammed spoon. Her younger brother, Romesh, had his porcine eyes glued to the newspaper which was out of his reach. He was desperate to know what movies were showing at the matinee. He swallowed a piece of banana, and blurted out, "Daddy, have you finished with the paper? Can I have it?" Shukdev Sharma handed the paper to his son without a word, looked at his watch, and then at his wife. It was twenty past eight.

Sulochana, having demolished a substantial and calming breakfast, was stirring a cup of tea. She glanced at her husband with sleepy eyes. Shukdev took a cigarette from a silver case and lit it. Romesh cried out to himself, "Hey, yar, look at that, Elvis or is it the Rivoli..." Shukdev silenced him with a wave of his hand, and spoke to his wife, as a long-married husband speaks to a long-married wife.

"Do you remember what day it is, Sulochana?"

"The eighteenth," she dutifully countered.

"And the significance of the day?"

"Isn't it that the Negro... the African is coming today, no?"

"Yes."

"It is a mistake. Do you think he takes our food? Should I give him the best sheets?"

"If I can possibly leave the office by five, I'll go and collect him myself. But you know how busy I am these days, and how things crop up at the last moment... I mean I might not be able to get away in time in which case... he... the Ne... I mean our guest will come here on his own and you... you would have to entertain him until I get back."

"But that's terrible," she sired shrilly. "I just won't know what to do with him."

"Sulochana," he now spoke with a little indulgence, "You are well known in Delhi for the gracious... way... you receive guests. We have had foreign guests every year for the last five years."

"Yes," she refused to give in, "but they were different."



"A Negro is not very different from anyone else," he was reassuring and he liked to hear what he was saying, "In fact, they are very charming, very civilized people. I have no doubt we will have a very enriching experience." Now he looked at his children. Romesh was obviously not listening to the conversation at all, with his eyes fixed on the sports page. Sheila was quietly looking out of the window, her eyes watching nothing. "I have been told he's a very nice young man, and something of a poet too."

"That makes it worse," reacted Sulochana.

"Does he write poetry in his own language, Daddy, or in English?" asked Sheila.

"I don't know that," said Shukdev, slightly annoyed that his daughter should be interested in the visitor's poetry. "I don't think he is much of a poet, though."

"In any case, Sheila, you must not go anywhere near this man," said Sulochana with the finality of the Indian mother.

"But why?" protested Sheila. "I have always been introduced to the foreign guests of this family. In fact, Dicky... I mean Mr. Ward was quite friendly with me."

Sulochana blushed. She said softly, "He... they all were different."

Shukdev looked at his watch and grimaced. He had to give the final decision, once a controversy had arisen. "Your mother is... right", he announced. "I mean she is right in saying that you should keep out of sight of the Negro... I mean our African guest." Then he added, reminiscing officially and briefly, "I remember in the distant past when I was a student in England and staying with a widowed landlady, that the daughter of the house was invisible as far as I...er...was concerned. Her presence was substantiated only on the day that I left... when... er... she appeared with the others to say goodbye. And that was the first and the last time I saw her."

He got up, looking at his watch again, and walked briskly toward the bathroom. Sulochana watched his disappearing figure, shuddering in her mind at the prospect of having to receive the guest alone. As if to prepare herself for the ordeal, she asked Sheila: "Aren't you playing tennis this evening?"

Sheila said nothing.

"You better come back later than usual."

"I will, mother." Sheila got up. "Do unto the blacks what the whites have done unto you."

Sulochana glared at her daughter.

Sheila took no notice of her mother's anger. "Try to be nice to the Negro from the African jungle, mother." She was for a moment merciless. "They don't eat elderly women."

Sulochana sat there, aimlessly looking at the ruins of the breakfast table. It somehow or the other resembled her own life, at least for the time being.

## TWO

Peter Kabaku was a magnificently melancholy man. He brooded over everything, mostly over the unfolding, unwritten history of tomorrow, and its ingredients: the events and non-events of today. In short, he was a man with a mission, and like all such men, was constantly awed by the role he was playing in a drama he did not quite understand and was yet more captivated by it than the audience. As he stepped into his thirties, he realized that his mission had grown larger than himself, and this only enhanced the mystique of the mission and the men who were caught in its web, including Peter Kabaku, of Kenya. At times he felt like an astronaut orbiting round his mission, an unknown but tantalizing planet which he could sense, even at times see (in his vision), from a distance. He revolved around it, bound to it by an umbilical cord.

Two years and more in India, with a mission, had enlarged Peter Kabaku's melancholy, and lent it a cosmic content. His exposure to India had led to an imbalance that was beginning to worry Peter Kabaku in his long hours of loneliness. India was ready to give, but not to take, and Peter sometimes felt like God before creation with so much to give and none to receive it. An oppressive sense of futility would assail him at times, and he knew it was different from the cosmic futility that reconciled the Indian to the universe of his life. India fed Peter Kabaku's melancholy, and he chewed it in his mind as he went about discharging his mission.

On that same evening when his fellow-African, Solomon Kuchiro, had driven in a taxi through white gates into a house off Rajpath, Peter Kabaku sat brooding in his dingy room. He saw nothing of the pink and gold evening except for the filtered gloom that seeped through the skylight. The air was stuffy with

the smell of stale detergents and spices that pervaded Constitution House where Peter Kabaku had a room. He felt like being in the womb of gray cotton wool. He stubbed out a cigarette. He rubbed his pink palms against his trouser leg. He got up slowly. His thick corrugated lower lip in a spout of dejection. A letter just begun lay open. The same two sentences had lain blankly before him for the last half an hour. He went toward the bed, plopped down on it as a fish falls on land. He hoped the bed would collapse into a mound of split wood. He broke the matchbox, crushed it in his hand and scattered the bits on the floor. Gandhi's photograph on the shelf gazed at him, what a catastrophic noise the glass would make! He turned away telling himself, "Comes from being cooped up all day... with all these books, with memories... with ideals and dreams." And suddenly he was pierced by the thought that was hurting him, somewhere deep into his being, for several months now. The thought that had turned into one arrow-sharp question: What am I doing here? Everything seemed too alien; sometimes he doubted if he had a connection with the world in which he found himself. He was then seized with all manners of doubts. India breeded doubts. He did not know who he was, why he was... He was Peter Kabaku, resident of Constitution House, New Delhi, President of the African Students' Union, he was a revolutionary with a mission, and he had come to India more than two years before, to learn, to learn, and he had been learning—India was so keen to teach—he was learning... spawned, spurned black seed in cracked black soil.

He had waited for the seed to sprout, and was waiting still. Peter Kabaku was expecting to witness the birth of a new force: a new togetherness of continents, of millions upon millions of people, of hopes and dreams and ideals. Meanwhile he was transmitting to his village, to his country and to his people what his eyes, his brain and his missionary mind were learning. Like a ritual every other Sunday Kabaku sat down and composed a report to Wachira, his wife and comrade, and she knew where his letters were to be sent, depending on their content. He was finding these reports more and more difficult to write. The two sentences he had completed this evening stared at him with the

eyes of an aged Indian peasant, seeing nothing, communicating nothing. Kabaku confessed to himself that he had little to write about; in fact, most of his recent letters had very little to say, for he himself had somehow grown doubtful of the meaning of what he had said before. It made Peter sad, very sad. He had arrived in India as the ambassador of one freedom movement to another, and although India had obtained its freedom several years ago, and Kenya had just started its struggle, Peter believed that his own country and even Africa could learn a great deal from the Indian experience. After more than two years' explorations in India he was now beginning to ask questions which eluded clear-cut answers. And whenever Peter reflected on his Indian experience his mind began at the beginning. The day he had set foot on the soil of India. And the place where he had his first room. It was a cluster of old army barracks built during the second world war for American G.I.S. Narrow centipede corridor with rooms leading off on either side, like the legs of that insect. Dark rooms, hardly touched by the sun. That was Raisina Hostel. Uneven patches showed mortar and bricks where the plaster had fallen away in longing sighs for death. The stairs were shaky with missing banisters, like old men's teeth. It was a hostel officially meant for bachelors, but an acute housing shortage compelled many men to live in it with their families or their equivalents. Most of the residents were of course Indian. But there was a sprinkle of foreigners—from China, Nepal, Burma, Ceylon, and Africa.

Peter was given a room in this honeycomb of barracks, and he was known not as a Kenyan but as an African. Indians generally regard Africa as one country and are quite unable to distinguish between African nationalities. If you had black skin, kinky hair, and so on, you were an African, and, in private conversation between Indians, a Negro from Africa. This was one of the things that Peter had learnt within the first days of his residence in Delhi. He found it easier to learn Indian prejudices than to understand India. The latter was really difficult. Not one of the Africans living in India found it easy either. They weltered in great opaque areas of emotional chaos which made them stumble when they tried to understand India emotion-

ally or intellectually. Perhaps it was so in all Asia. Peter had begun to doubt if there was any substance in the great bolstered up theme of Afro-Asianism. He sensed a guilt in the minds around him, in his own mind, in the minds of his African brethren. They all knew, as he knew himself, that in minute and cryptic ways, in one fell stroke, politely and crudely, Indians excluded them. So he imagined did the Burmese, the Chinese, and the Indonesians. Where was the guilt and what for he did not know, except that it was in the constitutions of all nations, in their holocausts, in the dark crucibles where the story cannot be told.

Guilt had greeted guilt one day more than two years before, the day Peter Kabaku had entered through the Gateway of India. This was the land of Gandhi, the land of Nehru: Indian soil, the scatologist's delight.

Men of Bombay scurrying about, moving with the robot steps of men used to walking the streets of a large metropolis, even those racing busy men would glance at him and in that look Peter would see a reflection of his own strangeness, of the guilt of nations and civilizations rejecting one another for centuries. Women of Bombay, stiff with nylon elegance, would look up hastily, nostrils dilating with dismay, they smelted his strange African redolence. Kabaku's ethnic trivia, his purple tragedy, the man on the bus, no, the man on the train, moved or wanted to move a seat or two away from him. Yes, he knew, there would be formal politeness and private rudeness, or so it would seem to him. His outward form would, like a shadow, dog him with isolation. A shrinking glance or a reluctant hand, and Peter Kabaku would moan in that shorthand way that all chronic sufferers do.

A train moving across eight hundred miles of brown land. A train bulging with people who always seemed to be travelling, brought him to the Delhi railway station. Peter found himself helplessly lost in the bewildering tangle of neon lights, whirring fans, and endless knots of people rotating like molecules in a heated chamber. He was being shoved about from all sides colliding with legs and arms and corners of trunks. Suddenly his African manliness got hold of him, he caught by the arm a tarbaned man who had given him a push, and was about to prove that he pro-

posed to stand no nonsense even on the nonwhite soil of India, when a hand loomed in front of him, and a man said, "Are you Mr. Peter Kabaku of Kenya?"

Peter was thrilled by this recognition. He let the tarbaned man go, and shouted in joy, "Yes! Yes. I am Peter Kabaku, from Kenya."

"My name is Madan Kapoor," his sleek hair escaped the rush of the crowd. "I have come to welcome you to the capital of India, and hope that you will enjoy your sojourn..." He would have said more but he was knocked sideways by a mammoth merchant with a mammoth anxiety about his belongings.

"Thank you," said Peter, competing with the noises of deafening steam hissing, whistles, screeches, jangles, crashes and fizzles. "I feel fortunate and honored to be in India. I have come to learn, and I hope to learn a lot..."

Madan Kapoor introduced a girl who seemed to have many different sets of arms and legs and faces. He belonged to the Indian Council of Cultural Relations and she represented the Indo-African Friendship Society. They found a little pool of quietness, and the girl, whose name was Asha Bhatia, and who had been introduced as Kumari (Miss) Bhatia, cleared her throat, wet her lips, and emitted a stream of carefully prepared sentiments. She was a little nervous. "You, Peter Kabaku," she spoke like an orator's apprentice, "You, Mr. Kabaku, have come to India as a representative of the newly awakened Africa. We, here in India, we welcome you here, and our hope is that you and other fellow Africans will be instrument in forging new bonds of close...and intimate friendship between the great India and the great Africa."

Peter Kabaku tried to listen, but he was wondering why the girl would not look at his eyes even once, and why were her nostrils quivering. But she stopped, and Peter bowed, and said, "Thank you very much. You are... India is very kind."

They fought their way to a waiting car. Peter was tired. He could hardly respond to Madan Kapoor's enthusiastic running commentary on the historical monuments the car was speeding by, and he quietly dozed off until the car jolted to a stop in front of Raisina Hostel which was to be Peter's home.

In the hall there was a sheaf of papers to sign, dates of births, father's, mother's, name, other names, passports, numbers, more numbers, purposes, currencies, lengths of stays. After half an hour of this, and some confusion with the advice of the clerk at the desk, and the two official friends of Africa, Peter discovered that he had been allotted room number 33, and they all trooped up. Everything was covered with the brown varnish of bureaucracy. Bed in a corner, table, two chairs, wardrobe which was more an interrogator, and a flanky mirror emphasizing the dinginess of the walls, and, of course, the smell.

Kapoor and Peter exchanged a few polite phrases, Kumari Bhatia wetting her lips, stood apart, silent, frequently hiding the brief swollenness of her breasts under the folds of her silken sari. After a while, they all said *namastay* in the interest of Indo-African friendship. Peter was left alone with his luggage, and his sadness.

He felt mortified. He sat down to write to Wachira. He felt old bruises and tried to comfort himself by running down all grooves of thought. It was the expression on what's-her-name's face. What did they know of Africa? What could he tell them? What did he know of India, of Asia? What were they going to tell him? They had some dim picture of Africa as a continent of impenetrable jungles peopled with primitive blacks, uncivilized, the naked pigmy with his poisoned spear, people who believed in ghosts, spirits, witchcraft and cities of the dead. A people immoral, dancing savagely to drums and indulging in all sorts of shocking sexual orgies. Was it a picture painted by Christian missionaries and Hollywood movies, and outdated ignorantly written books of knowledge? Why should the black fall into a different category to the white, cream, yellow or brown? He could not rationalize the effect of these attitudes on him as a Negro. He was tormented. The sadness in him became larger and larger, like the lengthening darkness of the evening outside.

Two years and more had limped by since that day. Years, months, weeks, and days in which Peter Kabaku had learned a lot, he must have, in the interest of Afro-Asian, and Indo-African friendship. It was a different matter that he did not quite know



what he had learned. Did anyone? He was once told by an Indian *sadhu*: "The ignorant has no doubts. The enlightened has no doubts. We have doubts only when we have begun to learn." "What if the doubts become larger and larger, and overshadow all that one has learned?" he had asked. "You have to fight doubt with faith," the mad had replied, his eyes bloodshot and drowsy. He gulped down a black mound of opium with a glass of milk, and repeated, "Faith."

Faith is something that has eluded Peter Kabaku. Kenya, his motherland, was impassioned from British repression, burning with the Mau-Mau revolution. He lacked faith in violence and bloodshed. There must be a better, more enduring way to men's freedom from the slavery of man, he told himself, and when the leaders of the revolution decided to send him to India as a camouflaged student to "cultivate" Indian support for the Kenyan struggle, he was glad to get away from it all. He was happy to have an opportunity to learn the Indian experience of non-violence, and for two years and more he had tried to look for the Gandhian way in Indian life, and he had seen but little of it anywhere. With the result that he was unable to have faith in non-violence either. And, with every passing month, he had known that his people would have nothing to do with the peaceful approach, with non-violence, and he himself would not be able to return to their midst with the peaceful staff in hand. This was Peter Kabaku's tragedy, the stuff that made his magnificent melancholy. He was a Kikuyu, and no people were more devoted to peace than his own tribe. "Thaaa-a-e", they would say, "Peace be with you", to greet one another. Now they were caught in a vise of violence and were fighting the British with every lethal weapon they could muster. The British were replying with greater violence. Violence was beating with the blind hammer of anger and hatred, and the sparks flew and lodged with men's eyes like red motes, and they were incensed. And here was Peter Kabaku, one of them, a leader, thousands of miles away, looking for another way that did not seem to exist, except in the utopian dreams of the Gandhis who live in history rather than in the soils and souls of their lands and peoples.

Peter Kabaku was still gazing eyelessly at Gandhi's photo-

graph when a child who looked like a water baby with a square lemon head, knocked loudly, and wagged, "Telpoon... Telpoon..."

Peter went down the stairs to the office.

"Is that Peter? Peeeetre, you missionary with shameful zeal, I have to interrupt your idealistic pursuits, and I have here crippled, maimed, irreparable fragments of a heart in a matchbox."

"Solomon, is it Solomon speaking? I can't understand one bloody word you say."

"I said, through this black handle of gloom, I said, are you busy and can I come to see you... can I come now?"

"Where are you and what are you doing? Aren't you a guest of Mr. Sharma?"

"I am the black jeweled column standing in the British Council library with a circle of admiring lilliputians around me. What I am doing is talking to you... but like all my audiences you can't understand me. Can I come, my friend?"

"Come on, Solomon. I'll be waiting in my room."

"The column falls and the bits skip into your room in a jiffy. Bye."

Peter put his letter away. Solomon was a problem. He was too much alive. And you can't be too much alive in India. He loved too much and hated too much, and talked too much. Peter Kabaku was the leader of all Africans living in India. Each African was, like him, an ambassador of the continent. Peter had thought that if Solomon could live with a good Indian family for a few days, he might be better able to adjust himself to Indian society. It was he, Peter, who had selected Solomon to be Shukdev Sharma's guest for a week. He could not help feeling responsible for Solomon's conduct in the Shukdev Sharma household.

Solomon arrived. He appeared in the doorway and stood stock still with his eyes shut. Dramatically he put a pile of books on his head, his hand on his hips, and minced with grace to a chair, where he sat down, with the pile of books still on his head. He looked at Peter with those vague yellow eyes, and blinked a couple of times. Peter was trying to smile.

The books fell from the springy wild mane where they were

cushioned and tumbled on the floor. Solomon put a hand to his heart, extracted a matchbox from his shirt pocket, opened it, showed the empty tray to Peter, tried to speak, wilted, and burst into roaring laughter, tears filling up the yellow vacuum of his eyes.

Peter, puzzled, asked, "Are you laughing or crying?"

"Oooh, Petrus," said Solomon, wiping the tears on his shirt sleeve, "My blood is no longer flowing, what shall I do? No music, no sand glasses of reason, no round mother, no sloops of art, how do I revive this chewed up heart? There's only a glacial torrent of Indian greatness, and, oooh Peter, a mother goddess more frightening than Kali up with her bloodless, non-violent sword to protect a piece of glazed pottery from the brute vandalism of an unwelcome intruder."

"Solomon," Peter Kabaku cried out impatiently, "why can't you speak normally, clearly? I don't understand..."

"How can you understand, you the official builder of Afro-Asian dreams?"

"Are you unhappy there?" Peter asked preparing himself for a brief sermon on how an African must behave in a foreign country.

"Unhappy? How can one be unhappy when the bright fruit skinned pottery glazed day has cracked into night, and she she she sheeee...!"

Solomon suddenly stopped talking and would not say another word for a while. Peter walked about his room looking lost. Then, Solomon got up from the chair, walked with measured steps, brushing against Peter on his journey, went to the bed, got down on all fours and crawled up to it, lay down and closed his eyes. As Peter was about to say something, Solomon's chewed up heart spoke.

"Gramophone records, long underwears, cash-chemists  
and dreams,

The drawn curtains on the closed window  
With the yellow fog rubbing its muzzle on the panes,  
Lamp-shades, tea-spoons and coffee-cups and all the  
Men's-Only picture post-cards on the wall--ye are  
all my loves.

The sad tinkling of the piano through the dusk  
The Old Man's footsteps and the red-brick sea of roofs  
Now ye are all that I love.

Time of the year, time of the year, the rust is eating  
Warm bed and soft pillows but no whisper of love  
Small glass and booze-bottle and a bed-side Annouilh,  
Time of the year, time of the year, the Old Man's  
  sleeping,  
The snow-flakes in a light-hush are calling for the dove.

He jumped up, looking at his watch, and rushed to the door, turned back, and waving his hand to a puzzled, bewildered Peter, hurried, "I must run, Guru Peter, the Brown Sahib and the Pink Lady must be getting ready for dinner, and I must present myself as the sacrificial goat for a second lecture on the greatness of Gandhu et ail... India must pour out all the burden of her myriad years... You, Sage Peter, He'd better be at home, sez she, .. Than writin' letthers, sez she, About his betthers, sez she... Bye, Peter, and don't worry, Africa is black enough, I couldn't make it blacker, not to my Indian hosts, anyway..."

He was gone. The door remained ajar. Peter Kabaku closed it. He walked steadily to the writing table, and sat down determinedly to finish his letter.

## THREE

She could hear her voice as she bounced through the hall into her own room in front of the house. How shrill and stilted her mother's voice sounded, the formal tone, the social falls, the arabasque of laughter decorating the phrases. But despite the politeness of the gestures, Sheila could hear a note of nervousness in her mother's voice. A mother's real voice, where the manner and tone suggested hostility—the flutter of the bird around its nest—while the words were those of a gracious, if bourgeois, hospitality. Sheila could smell a waft of incense which she associated with her mother's prayer room, a smell she found both pleasant and unpleasant. It had nothing to do with its pungent arrogance, the way the smell came and knocked every other smell out of its way. It had something to do with its association . . . she liked it, liked the way it would strike her like the first moment one opens one's eyes after sleep to find the room full of sunlight bouncing off the walls. The smell of the smooth security of the household which her mother ran. The way the sweeper came every morning and afternoon and wiped the stone floors with a clean smelling detergent, the way you always get all sorts of fried things and sweet things for tea—and Sheila was very fond of eating—the way you could have a shower after tennis sipping the lemonade the uniformed bearer had ready for you, the way after your shower you had a large choice of clean clothes, neatly stacked in your cupboard, the way all this happened without your having to lift a finger to make it happen.

She could hardly hear the other voice, was he feeling too constrained in the presence of her mother, was he, this stranger whom she was to carefully avoid, too tongue-tied to speak in her presence? But as her mother's words floated to her room, no more distinctly, but like sounds too familiar to need much atten-

tion, Sheila's mind became vaguely aware of the surroundings in which she lived. She found herself quite pleased, despite her anger and resentment at being treated like a child. She was certainly much better off, much better off than many of her friends—Prabha, Premila, Uma. Prabha would have to carry water out of a tank in a bucket to have her morning bath, which she would do out on the roof of a government tenement her family lived in.

Prabha had never really complained but Sheila remembered her embarrassment when she brought Prabha home one day after college, and they had gone into Sheila's room—and Prabha had marvelled at the fact that each bedroom had a bathroom and that water flowed from the taps and shower at all times of the day. How Prabha had twittered and then slowly been reduced to a dumb wonder at all the things in Sheila's house. There was a shortage of water in Delhi, but the municipal authorities saw that the pillars of government like Shukdev Sharma had water whenever they wanted it. The colony in which Prabha Ahuja and her family lived—meant for humble and dwarfed clerks—India's diminished urban men—got water in their two taps only between six and eight in the morning. But Prabha knew this was how things were, and once she knew this, she just accepted it as a natural law.

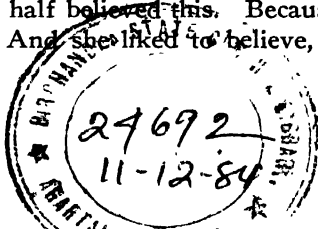
Sheila was slowly becoming acutely conscious of these little amenities of her life. She saw how the other daughters of her 'social level' vied with one another to possess more fashionable clothes, more imported articles, more imported pop music. She was sometimes bored with them.

She could not have preened herself (albiet modestly) when showing Prabha the wonders of the house, and from the height of her superior position demanded to be admired and envied, or stretched down languidly to give a little bounty which is what most of the others in nests like hers would have done. No, she was beginning, horror of horrors, to feel a guilt when she saw what she had in relation to what Prabha did not have. It was a strange kind of guilt, and Sheila was at an age when at times she was brutally honest to herself. Her honesty usually demolished her parents (whom she loved and respected, of course) or her brother (who really was an idiot and would be director of a large firm

one day, and knew it), but only occasionally demolished herself. She would, for example, blame her father for having it too good in independent India although he had done nothing for the freedom struggle, but had, on the contrary, been for many years strongly opposed to it. She would sometimes hate his smug complacency, his ever-increasing importance, even the smile, the false smile of self-adulation, with which he would respond to the endless flattery that went on around him. She *knew* the inner emptiness of her mother's life, and how comic were all her efforts to rise up to every occasion, as her father put it. But she took for granted the surroundings in which she was growing up, and had come to believe that she was an integral part of her environment, in some inexplicable way detached from her parents, and yet inextricably mixed up with them. She knew that she would suffer horribly, perhaps she would not be able to survive at all, if the things that came to her so naturally, completely unasked, were taken away from her. What if she could not play tennis or have a shower at all times of the day or ride a bicycle just for fun. And yet sometimes she would like to do something, or at least she would like to see herself do something that would take her away from all her comforts and amenities, and she could endure the hard realities of life just as Prabha did. In a way Sheila would feel quite jealous of Prabha, and would like to see herself bathing cheerfully out on the roof of a government tenement with the water she had carried with her own hands in a bucket.

At this moment Sheila could see the hollowness of her mother, and she became sarcastic to herself, and the guilt seemed somewhat heavier than usual, for her mother was putting on a mere show of hospitality to a guest whom she had herself invited to the house. She despised it all. And so, muttered Sheila, with an attempt at logical analysis, if I despise part of what makes this possible, I must despise the whole of it, I must be able to do without water all day, without beautiful clothes and books, I must wash my one or two torn saris, and live in a sordid hostel, and eat bad food.

But she only half believed this. Because she had read several Russian novels. And she liked to believe, or rather half believe,



that she could readily go out and live like Prabha, and yet be sincere, and intense. Sheila was a romantic.

She wandered into her bathroom, with its yellow tiles and yellow towels, for her shower. She had heard the stuttering excitable voice of their African guest as he thanked her mother and disappeared into the guest house which was separate from the main house but connected to it by an archway. It was just opposite her room. She wondered if he would be impressed by the raw silk curtains, and the soft dunlopillo bed, the Swedish chairs and the statue of Kali on the table. Or whether he would laugh at it, as she suspected that the last guest of theirs, Cynthia, had. Sheila could never think of Cynthia Clifford without a sense of awe and a pang of envy, and normally she did not want to remember that woman. She was trying not to think of her, watching out of her window, when she saw the African sauntering out of his room, and, without even looking toward her window, rushing out toward the gate with long hurried steps. Obviously he needed some fresh air, poor man thought Sheila, and the images of her mother and of Cynthia crossed her mind at the same time, cutting each other at several points. Cynthia had kept Sulochana on her toes for the whole week she was their guest, thought Sheila, and, at this moment, she did not feel the sympathy for her mother she had always persuaded she felt. Cynthia was audacious at all times, and was often atrociously frank, which placed her in an awkward situation in an Indian family where frankness was regarded as offensive irreverence. Sheila remembered how pale her mother looked, how incredibly horrified, when, within ten minutes of her arrival, Cynthia said that most Delhi houses were rather like a Victorian chambermaid's room, put together with all the odd bits of furniture that did not quite do, but, she added derisively, with even less taste and no style. Cynthia had made no qualification to exonerate her host's house.

Sheila smiled bitterly as she remembered that her mother had been particularly irritated and intimidated by this guest. Cynthia was a vivacious and professional iconoclast, who had shattered, among other things, Sulochana's plaster cast ideal of her husband. Sulochana had burst out as she rarely did. "Probably," her mother had parried, tripping over her words, "probably, because



the setters of fashion were the English women who lived in India, and they were probably chambermaids at home." And then she cried as soon as she was alone, because this was a breach of all rules. To say this to a guest, to her guest, who was partly English, was unthinkable. It was the kind of thing that a group of Indian ladies at a bridge or coffee party might say to each other if they knew there was no traitor among them.

Sheila had been red with anger and shame, but Cynthia had laughed, like a young boy, and said she entirely agreed, only Sulochana had put it more cleverly than she herself would have done. She pretended not to notice that Sulochana was on the verge of crying, and went on chatting with Shukdev when she suddenly excused herself and rushed out of the living room. Was it at that time that Sheila began to dislike Cynthia? She could not remember as she scrubbed her neck and arms with scented soap. She closed her eyes, and saw Cynthia's face as clearly as if she was standing before her. Cynthia's funny boyish hair, enormous vitality, mock seriousness, and a green-eyed intensity, Sheila could see it all in that face. It wasn't a particularly beautiful face, but the large sky-blue eyes and the large cheek-bones gave it a personality Sheila had hardly noticed in any other woman's face. Sheila remembered how she saw her father lose his poise and balance in the presence of Cynthia, how off-handed he pretended to be, and how pre-occupied he really was. Sheila was sensitive to many of her father's moods. She was now gently scrubbing her breasts, she was unusually fond of them, and suddenly she felt an unspoken pain deep inside her, and she realized why she was looking for Cynthia's brashness, her harsh judgments, her lack of consideration of people's feelings, and her unflagging energy, all of which she regarded as quite unwomanly. It was not her mother's inadequateness in the presence of Cynthia that made Sheila resent and even hate Cynthia. She had never seen her mother so unsure of herself. Her mother would wander in and out of Sheila's room, of her brother's room. How pathetic and objectionable were her attempts to be wanted and needed. Her mother had started to listen to pop music with Romesh and would have even gone to the cinema with him and his friends had he not scoffed at her—or so Sheila thought.

Sheila's whole world had been shaken. She had not seen her mother so wanting before, nor her father so bereft of repose. She had turned away from both, and retreated into the reserved secrecy of her being. She found she was reading more and more Russian novels and flirting with a Burmese and an Arab at the university, and becoming more and more taciturn and irritable at home. Dark apprehensions were forming in her mind, fears that she could not identify, and therefore found all the more unbearable. What she saw that night was darker than all the fears that had been tormenting her. She had been reading. It was quite late, past one. She had heard the car come in at the gate and quickly put the light out. Her father did not approve of her being awake late into the night. Her room was next to the porch. Her mother had not gone out to dinner with their guest, pleading a headache. She had not even come to sit with herself and Ranesh while they had dinner. That meant she was very upset.

The car with her father and Cynthia. The pale moon of an October night. An embrace, and a whispered conversation. And as she was still peeping through her curtains, Sheila saw her father disappear into Cynthia's room. She felt puzzled, humiliated, angry. She cried. The next morning was no different from any other morning, except that Sulochana was still in bed, with a severe headache, when her father drove Cynthia, gay and warm in her goodbyes, to the airport. Sheila could look neither her mother nor her father in the face for several days. She knew they were not speaking to one another except, for form's sake, in the presence of others. She resented both for breaking a harmony of her life. She hated Cynthia. A letter from Cynthia arrived a fortnight later addressed to Sulochana. Her father was on tour. Sheila was the first to see it in the mail box. She destroyed it.

Sheila slid on the bathroom floor, recovered her balance, and looked at herself in the mirror over the basin with a good deal of satisfaction and secret pleasure. Damp hair, almond eyes, even a little like one of Dostoevsky's heroines. No, she was far too healthy, too glowing even in her sadness, and showed nothing of the consuming, consumptive look the heroines in the

Russian novels had. A model in a fashion magazine, then? No, her hair was all wrong for that. She decided finally on one of the Mughal princesses, wrapped her towel round herself to suit the role, and swept majestically out of the bathroom and found her mother sitting on her bed.

"Sheila," her mother began as soon as she entered the room. "The Negro... the African has gone out... your father is very late... I had to entertain him alone... I must have a word with you before he returns."

Sheila waited, getting angry. Her breasts rose and fell, and her fingers held loosely to the towel.

"Don't stand half naked before me," Sulochana blurted out. "Get dressed first."

"I will," Sheila said casually. "What have you got to say about our African guest?"

"I definitely don't want you to appear while we have him in the house."

"Where should I hide for a whole week?" Sheila's voice was openly mocking.

"I've been thinking about it," Sulochana took no notice of Sheila's tone. "You can't really hide yourself. Why don't you go to your aunt for a few days?"

"I won't do that."

"Why? I know you don't like her. But we are in a crisis."

"What crisis?"

"We are in a crisis, and this is the time when relatives and friends become important."

"I can't stand her. I won't go."

Sulochana felt utterly helpless.

"Then?"

"Then what?"

"You can't appear..."

"I have heard that one time too many. I won't appear."

"You promise?"

"Well, if you don't want me to join you at dinner, I won't. I won't go up to talk to him. But I live in this house, don't I, and he has seen me, hasn't he? And I hope you know what you are doing."

"Well, you must try to avoid him as long as he is in the house. That's what I want and that's what your father wants."

"All right. Now please let me dress."

Sulochana got up to go, and then seeing Sheila's face, sat down determinedly, and said, "I can understand your feeling, but you must understand too. Everyone knows your father. He is a very important man. You must be careful who your friends are. That Prabha—I'm sure she has some disease—and her father is only a clerk. No, don't think I hate them, or do not care for them. They may be nice people. But they're not *our* people. You have to think of your prestige. At least, of *our* prestige." She now got really angry because Sheila had turned her back on her and begun to dress, baring her entire back and shoulders, and an ample part of her legs. "And I won't allow your friends...those funny uncouth boys you find so interesting...to stay up so late at night, as one did the other night. You are getting out of hand, Sheila. I won't let you get out of hand."

Sheila, now fully clothed, went to her table, sat down, picked up one of her books and started reading with theatrical concentration.

As soon her mother left, Sheila lifted her head and stared out of the window. She always liked to watch an autumn twilight. The scarlet sky fading out, and the light darkness of evening creeping in, stealthily almost. It made her sad. She saw the gardener watering the beds. She let her glance languidly over the sleek lawn, and the regimented flowers. Such a huge garden and every corner of it tended. There were three gardeners to look after it. She looked at the wiry thin legs under the greyish *dhoti*, as they darted backwards and forwards carrying a water can. The legs and shaved head were darker than the soil. And surely, she thought, dark as the African youth. The gardeners watered the dozens of pots of plants which lined the guest house verandah. Sheila wondered how Mr. Kuchiro behaved at tea with her mother. What did he say that made her mother so afraid? Why did he go out, and what was he doing now, and where? Perhaps he had gone to his fellow-Africans and were telling them how rudely he was being

treated by his Indian hosts. But how could he know that Sheila had been forbidden to appear before him? He couldn't possibly have known this already, though he will before long. Sheila heard the sound of her father's car enter through the gate. The driver got out, as he did every time, opened the door for her father to emerge. She saw Shukdev walk tiredly toward the lawn, while the driver collected his portfolio and files and took them to his office room. Sheila saw her mother come out of the house, and meet her father on the lawn, and she heard the sound of their conversation, though she could not hear what they were saying. Her father laughed, and walked casually toward the guest house. The three gardeners came running and stood around him, at a distance, their heads slightly bent. Sheila guessed her father was asking about the guest, when he left and whether he had told them when he would be back. He then sat down briefly on a garden chair, and lit a cigarette.

Sheila ate her dinner in her own room. She refused to be attended by anyone, even by the matronly Hemlata who was her mother's personal maid, and who was in a way nearer to her than her mother. As she ate, she heard noises in the hall, of male voices, one of which, her father's, she knew, and the other, she guessed, was the African guest's. Sukhdev was escorting Solomon Kuchiro to the dining room. Sheila could hardly concentrate on eating. The doors of her room were wide open, and she could see them walk slowly through the hall. Sheila thought that the African looked uncomfortable. He had a garish tie on and was trying to flatten his wild mane of hair that made him look as if he was perpetually in a gale. She saw his eyes, light and waspish, with large pupils; they gave him such a vague detached look. Sheila could now hear her mother's shrill voice. "You sit here, Mr. Kuchiro," Sulochana was saying in a nervous tone, "here, next to Romesh. I hope you'll like our food." Sheila then heard a clatter of plates, and a bell-like voice say, "Thank you. I enjoy Indian food." There was a short uneasy silence. Sheila wondered if he was still trying to tame his mane. Sheila pushed her chair to the door which was now ajar. She wanted to hear every word that was said over that most unusual dinner.

"How do you like it here in India, young man?" her father's tired and worldly voice.

"I like it, though I haven't seen much."

"India is large and varied." Her father again. "A classic example of unity in diversity."

"That's what everybody tells me. Unity in English."

"What do you mean?"

"I sometime wonder if India would be one country if her two per cent. educated did not speak English."

"It's true that the British unified India. But India was one culturally and spiritually long before the British came. And she is one when the British have gone."

"I'm sure you are right, sir."

Sheila heard her mother's voice now. "But Mr. Kuchiro, you are eating nothing... I don't know what you will think of our hospitality. . . perhaps in Africa you don't eat such things... would you like something else?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Sharma. I am eating a lot. And such delicious food. No, thank you..."

"I understand you are studying at the university."

"Yes, sir. I am doing a degree in English literature, my Masters. The same university your daughter Sheila goes to."

Silence. A long silence. How did he know my name, wondered Sheila, he must have seen me at the university. She wondered how her mother took this from Solomon Kuchiro. And presently she heard her father's voice. "English literature? Will that be of much use in Africa? Perhaps economics, or politics, or even law would have been more useful. Africa seems to be so short of trained administrators."

"Africa, as you know, sir, is a continent. I come from Uganda. And I have no desire to be an administrator."

"What do you want to be?"

"I don't quite know. A writer maybe."

"Oh, really! That's very interesting." Sukhdev gave a yawn. "I remember. Mr. Kabaku told me you were a poet."

"Did he?"

"In what language do you write? Swahili?"

"English."

"I see. We have produced some fine poets in English. Have you read Sarojini Naidu? She died recently. A great lady."

"I have read her some. Quite good at times."

"I think she's a very good poet. Not as good as Shelley, Keats or Browning, but very good. Indians write good English. Mahatma Gandhi, Panditji himself, and many others. How's English writing in Africa?"

"Well, sir, I believe that the African countries and the West Indies are going to give the English language the vigorous kick it needs."

"I don't quite know what you mean . . . Have you made any friends?"

Sheila could not see Romesh. He had not spoken a word. Her father's voice seemed to be coming from some remote gramophone while it thought of other things.

"Not many. It's not easy."

"Why? Indians are a very friendly people."

"Perhaps they are, Over time."

"A foreigner has to go forward to make friends. In all countries. When I was in England . . . that's many years ago . . . I didn't find it easy to make friends with Englishmen."

"The English are terrible snobs, aren't they?"

"They are and they are not. When you know them, they are not snobs at all. Why do you find it difficult to make friends in Delhi?"

"Well, the social barriers here seem very high and very thick."

"Really? I'm not sure you are very right. Look at this household. Year before last we had an Englishman as our house guest for a week. Last year we had a lady from Paris. She was half French and half English. And this year we decided to have a guest from Africa. Would you say our social barriers are very high and very thick?"

"If I may ask a question, sir, why exactly did you decide to take in an African guest?"

"Why? Why not? This is the age of Afro-Asianism, isn't it? India—Asia—and Africa are very together, aren't they? I am one of those who believe in practicing what they preach. I say it is not enough to have friendly relations at government level.

Indians and Africans must know one another, like one another at personal level. We bring three hundred African students every year to our universities. We give them scholarships. This is a great thing we're doing. We're making three hundred African friends every year. And I would like to see all of them live for a while with Indian families. I know Panditji also wants this to happen. He was so happy when I told him that you're coming to live with us for a week."

For once Sheila thought her father's voice sounded alive. She heard Romesh excuse himself, and leave the table. She promptly closed her door. Romesh walked through the hall into his own room. Sheila pushed her door ajar again, and heard her father's somewhat excited voice.

"This Mau Mau thing in Kenya is wrong. I am glad to say that Mr. Kabaku agrees with me. Violence cannot bring freedom to Africa. Violence does not solve any problem. You must follow the Gandhian way. After all, the Mahatma is as much yours as he is ours. He started his unique experiment in South Africa, you remember?"

"He did. However, he did not fight for the rights of Africans. He fought for the rights of Indians."

"The Africans were then very backward, and had no political awareness. He has left his legacy for you as well for us."

"I know very little about Kenya. But I'm sure the stories about the Mau Mau you read in the newspapers are only one side of the truth."

"That may be. But that's hardly the point. The point is that the Africans cannot get rid of the British through violence. Besides, independence must not mean a break in your ties with England which is, after all, a very civilized country. Look at India. We have broken politically with Britain. But our relations with the British now are very friendly. Mahatma Gandhi hated British imperialism...no, no, he did not hate...hatred is foreign to non-violence...I mean...he fought British imperialism, but he loved the English people and regarded them as friends. That's non-violence. I think it is something great and unique which India has to share with the rest of the world."

Solomon said nothing.



"Don't you think so?" asked Shukdev.

"I must confess that I am very confused. Frankly speaking, I don't see much of Gandhi in India... I mean... in the Indian experiment... I don't see much of non-violence either."

"You don't?"

"India has fought a war in Kashmir. Only the other day the police fired on a crowd of workers outside Delhi. Three workers were killed."

"But you don't understand, young man. The Mahatma himself approved of our defending Kashmir with arm and aeroplanes from the invaders from Pakistan. And you can't govern without force."

"I'm sure you can't. That's why I'm so puzzled."

"You must read the Mahatma very carefully. He is not easy to understand. I found Mr. Kabaku very well read in Gandhism. If I remember right, he has even lived and worked in an Indian village, in the true Gandhian way."

"Peter Kabaku is different. I am an ordinary mortal, sir. I have a lot of love. And I have a lot of hatred."

"That's wrong, my boy. You should only love. You must not hate."

"I'm sorry, sir, I cannot agree with you. I hate a lot. I hate poverty, ignorance, injustice, oppression. And I hate those who conquer other people's lands and subjugate and exploit other nations. I hate those who deny justice to others, and I hate a lot of other things. Sometimes I hate myself, and the whole world... because I love it so much..."

Sheila heard her mother coming toward the hall. She had left the table, leaving the two men to their discussion in which she had no interest, for Sulochana, like most Indian society women, was poor at conversation, and felt particularly inhibited in the presence of men. At bridge or coffee parties of women she was a great talker, but she knew only how to talk about clothes and servants and husbands, and she was interested in the little political gossips the wives of the Shukdev Sharmas of Delhi avidly shared with one another. Sheila quickly shut the door and removed her chair to the reading table. Two books were open on the table, and a blank wad of paper. Sheila anti-

cipated that her mother would presently come into her room, and she began to read...

A damsel with a dulcimer  
In a vision once I saw;  
It was an Abyssinian maid,  
And on her dulcimer she play'd...

Abyssinia, that was Africa too, wasn't it? She saw a chocolate colored girl, with eyes as lustrous as a beetle's back, springy hair sticking up in ringlets that went up instead of down, circled with bands of pearls and rubies. She was dressed in flowing robes and held in her long dark hands an instrument that was something like a guitar, only rounder, what was a dulcimer, anyway? Sheila thought of getting up and going to the living room to get the dictionary, but she felt too exhausted. And then she remembered that the young African must be there, so, in any case, he could not go. She decided to leave it there, and started reading the other book. "The poetry of Coleridge known mainly through the Rhyne of the Ancient Mariner, and the less known Kubla Khan, is not representative of his time. He was, as is generally known, an eater of opium, and his defunct dreams and ravaged visions were anomalies considered in the light of general trend..." Sheila found this a little difficult to understand and, in fact, tedious. She would, she decided, copy out bits here and there from books of criticism for her essay and change the wording. That's what everyone does in any case...

At this point the door opened, and Sulochana came in, walked up to Sheila, was about to touch her, but stopped, sat on the bed, and said, "Did you hear?" Sheila said nothing, her eyes still fixed on the book, and her mother continued, "But how could you? You were not there. He said he hated everybody and everything, even himself. He must be a very dangerous man. He said he did not believe in non-violence, and he said that he saw no Gandhism in India." Sheila still said nothing, nor raised her head, and her mother, quite annoyed, got up, and remarked, "That's enough for tonight. Now turn in, it's late. When is your class tomorrow morning?"

Sheila wanted to be left alone. "I must start at eight."

"That's very good. Now, be a nice girl and go to bed."

She left. In a few moments she heard the car start and move through the porch, but by the time she rushed to the window, all she could see were the tail lights going toward the gate. They must have gone visiting, probably taking Solomon with them.

She smoothed her hair and went into the hall. The bearer was going round drawing all the curtains and pulling down the strawblinds against the smoky chill of October night. The second bearer was cleaning up the dinner things, flipping his cloth against the chairs, and dragging his feet. When he saw Sheila, he suddenly clammed up, eyes on the floor, his cloth put with exaggerated care on his shoulders. She wandered about aimlessly, looking at a print hanging on the wall, a long plait bobbing up and down as she moved. She flopped down on the sofa in the living room with a book in her hand, pretending not to look at the bearer at all, but watching him silently. The room smelled of smoke, and musty curtains. Sheila tried to pick up a pencil from the carpet with her bare feet. With her lips in a contented benign bow, she brought up a well-cared for-foot holding the pencil as confidently as if it had been in her hand, and dropped it into the sofa next to the book. She knew the servant was watching her, marveling at her feat, and he knew that she was watching him with a pleasure. Sheila got up and walked slowly down the passage to the back of the house.

She was depressed, and bored. She had never liked this time of night in any case, it was the time when, as a child, she saw her parents dressing to go out to cocktails and dinner, when she and Romesh would be thrown back on their homework or on each other, both of which were equally unpleasant.

She looked out from the back verandah into the courtyard with its *papita* tree, the giraffe of trees. The kitchen was separate from the house. On its courtyard a group of men—the servants and their relatives—was squatting on their heels, under the tree, and chatting and mocking. They always had this air of being like a flock of mynas descending and hooting after the cat had stopped prowling. This always happened when her parents were out.

A thick net of night texture fell over Sheila. It was so familiar, yet it made her uneasy. The garden at the back was as big as the garden at the front. Also on either side of the house, it stretched as wide to the flowering hedges that divided it from the garden of the next house. All the houses on this road were the same, all meant for the same kind of people who had the same kind of tastes, wives, children, cars, furniture, and ambitions. They were exclusively friendly with one another, the men sharing their satisfactions and frustrations, always flattering one another when they met, and maligning one another to others, the women chattering about servants, prices, imported gadgets, and ministers' wives. Hardly anyone from the street with houses smaller and nearer each other, with salaries lower and therefore voices and opinions to match, would ever come to call at the streets with larger houses. So it was that New Delhi was staid, set, with its blood congealed to stagnation, its arteries blocked by officialdom, its heart without a pulse.

A jackal howled. From somewhere in the direction of the vast wilderness that surrounded the President's house. Several other jackals took up the howl, until the whole pack was baying. This was the sound that gave Delhi its outline, reminded one that it was not the whole universe, that beyond it was a live world, a desert of subsiding heat, of small fires in the villages, of smoking cowdung, of bullocks resting in front of the huts, of fields of mustard. Sheila looked at the dark clumps of bushes and trees in the garden merging into the blue haze, and an orange light clear as coloured cellophane in the servants rooms. She heard the sound of the droning Hindi film songs coming from a radio.

She went in. Back to her room. Lay down on the bed, across it, with her legs high in the air, her thick plait of hair touching the floor the other side. A lizard on the ceiling was making chucking noises and darting after insects. The skylights high on the high walls were black and barred. She wished she felt tired and fell asleep. She wasn't tired. She wouldn't sleep even if she turned in. She was depressed. She was angry. She felt humiliated. Her lips trembled.

Sheila cried.

While crying, she made up her mind. She decided that tomorrow or the day after she would bump into Solomon Kuchiro and brave all the consequences.

## ***FOUR***

A village scene. Typical, for India excels in the typical. Fields all around, with sawing tresses of the sugarcane crop. The sky is blue and clear, a country sky. The winter sun has now unclenched its teeth. It bites two figures that are earnestly digging with pick axes. A breeze gently wafts the green leaves. It playfully lifts the edge of the sari of a corpulent figure, who notes it down with undue alarm.

A voice, a feminine voice, heaving with exertion, asks, "What is the economic policy of the Mau Mau?"

The pick axe is dropped. A curtain of dust obscures both figures for a while. A black hand wipes the sweat from the furrowed brows. The question is considered. The man looks suspiciously around him. "Economic policy, did you say?" He leans on the pick axe, and considers the question further. "I really don't quite know. We want the English people out of our land."

The other figure adjusts the papery sari that is blowing distractedly in the breeze. The brown face books intently at the black face. There is little communication between them.

"What will you do with the land?"

"I don't know. I have not thought about it."

"What about the land of the tribal chiefs?"

"They do not own any land themselves. In the African tribes, land is mostly communal property."

"What will you do with the Indians in Kenya?"

"I don't know."

"Are they with you or with the British?"

"Most of them are with the British. Almost none is for the Mau Mau."

"Are you for the Mau Mau?"

The man looks around him again. "I don't know," he says, "I really don't know."

"But you are against violence, aren't you? Then, you must be against the Mau Mau."

"It's too complex, and I can't answer you in one sentence. I do not like violence. I thought... I still sometimes think that I am against violence. But I have my doubts. I'm not sure."

The far-flung fields of cane were nearly ready for harvest. The wheat has been harvested—not a bad crop. The unmetalled road was a mess, having borne the burden of many feet and bullockcart wheels. A cock barked and dogs crew and the village women went dancing to the well—to gossip. They could not go for water—the brown woman explained to the black man—for the well was dry. It was a mistake to have dug it there. In fact the village water diviner had told the government people that they could never expect water there, but, you know, government people do not listen to village water diviners.

The colourful village women looked with unflagging interest at the two people who had come to their village, and who were digging trenches. They had come with the community development project. The women did not know why the two people were there, particularly the black man who looked so different from all the men they had seen, and was perhaps a foreigner. That's what their menfolk said. Perhaps they were digging for a school or a hospital. One woman wearing a daring sari suggested they might be digging for a dam. The others gave loud squels and laughed, so she said that the previous dispensary for cows had been washed away by the flooding Bhimra (that was the stream running through their village), and of course the Block sahib had now decided to build a dam. To which several women asked how could two people between themselves possibly build a dam, and the woman with the daring sari had to admit that she had no answer to that question; perhaps they were making a test or something. She joined in the loud squels and laughter that met the remark of a wit: "She is digging the grave of her virtue."

A cluster of village men were sitting under the banyan tree on string beds, smoking a hookah that they passed around. Some

were playing with their dusty toes, other were picking their noses, but on the whole they were just spitting and talking. "I asked the black man why he has come to Bhingarh," an old man was telling the group. "He told me he had come to learn. I said that there was nothing in our village, what could he learn here? He said everything is in the village and that he too is a villager. He speaks Hindi badly so it must be that he can't understand what he is saying."

"I came to India to learn, Miss Dutt," Peter Kabaku was telling his companion, in the meantime looking vacantly across the fields of mustard, "and I must have learned a lot. I still want to learn. But the more I see of India the more confused I am. And...how shall I put it?...and depressed."

"I have never seen you very happy," she remarked, speaking almost to herself. "Why should men of mission be always unhappy?"

"I am not a man of mission. I'm a small man, a little man, burdened by great impulses I don't...I've never quite clearly understood. And I have been always rather moody...gloomy, if you like...since I was a boy."

"Why did you come to India at all?" she asked, avoiding his eyes which were very sad.

"I have told you. We need India's friendship and understanding. My friends wanted me to come here. I wanted, too. Perhaps...that's what I think now...perhaps I wanted to run away."

"From what?"

"From everything. Murder, violence, torture. Hatred. Love. From everything."

She was silent. Afraid, why she did not know, to explore the subject further. Her silence made him silent too. He felt empty. Huge and empty.

"Shall we walk down to the river, Mr. Kabaku?"

Evening was settling lustily over the fields and wafts of human and buffalo dung were circulating in the wide earthy spaces. Miss Dutt, who had a sinus complaint, sniffed with vigor, gathered the folds of her sari into her hand, and said, "I want to talk about the dam."



As they walked past the huts they waved and smiled sadly at the villagers, who were smoking and spitting. Peter Kabaku was marching very slowly, staring seriously at the dust. Miss Dutt's energetic pace was impeded by her short legs; she was short of breath for she had to breathe through her mouth because of her sinus complaint. A woman carrying two pitchers on her head passed them, swinging her hips, and looking intently at them through her veil.

"Poor girl," sighed Miss Dutt. "She has to walk a mile or more for water, and she will come back with more germs than water."

Peter was about to remark that the problem of germs was almost as grave in Kenya, and perhaps it was easy to fight and drive away the British than to provide pure water to all Kenyans, when a little boy ran across their path. "Just look at him," cried Miss Dutt, "just look at him." Peter looked. He saw a bulging stomach, a running nose, spindly arms and legs, and no clothes. He looked more closely and saw a shaved head and a black string with a charm tied round the pelvis at the point where the bulge of the stomach subsided.

"I wonder what he is doing," said Miss Dutt.

"Oh, he is probably looking for his father, like my own Ngatha in my village in Kenya."

Peter Kabaku's eyes became misty. He patted the child on the head. It gave a little yelp and waddled away.

A vulture settled noisily over a bare branch. Peter privately made note of it. He argued the matter in his mind and decided that it was a bad omen.

"Not much of a river, is it, Mr. Kabaku?"

A sluggish stream was lying wormily in a wide sandy bed. A few women were collecting water, and others were squatting near sparse bushes attending to their evening toilet.

"You know, one of the advantages of having a tarred road is that they use the side of it—being the cleanest place—to empty their bowels, and then at least the river water wouldn't get contaminated."

Miss Dutt heaved a sigh, and said, "Ram, Ram," and sat down on the river bank. Peter glanced at the bank, looking for

signs. Everything looked equally muddy and brown. He whipped out a large spotted handkerchief and sat down on it, near Miss Dutt, but not too near.

For a while neither spoke. The silence became too heavy. He felt impelled to break it.

"You are a disciple of Gandhi, I'm told. A constructive worker. I have a burning desire to find something great and pure. I want to burn in a fire which will purify my heart and make it gold. That is what Gandhi and Nehru did. I have learned that. But I have much more to learn."

She looked at his face, could see only the white of his eyes. They were not burning. They looked dead. Like the eyes of dead fish.

"I see a spark of fire in you, Mr. Kabaku."

"What do you think of Gandhi?"

"I don't think of him, Mr. Kabaku. I am now thinking of this river. Very much."

"Yes. The river."

"This stream laughs and mocks at us. It's now so slender, so harmless. Like an evening breeze. But at monsoon time, it will pounce on us with the might of a thousand demons and destroy my school, and all that we have built."

"And so you want a dam."

"And so I want a dam. I have approached some officials. The Block officer is a blockhead. All that he wants is to be posted in a town. He hates this village, he hates all villages. I have seen people much higher than he. They say the large river that feeds the Bhimra will be dammed under the third five year plan at the cost of millions of rupees. But what happens to my school till then?"

"They may be right."

"They cannot be right. This village, these villages can't wait for six or seven years. I can't see my school washed away. We have to build the dam."

"How?"

"The way we began today. With our own hands. With the villagers' help."

"The dam you'll build may be washed away by the floods."

"You're talking like a bureaucrat." She was excited. She breathed heavily, and spoke with a nasal sound. "This is not the way to mobilize the village people. They have accepted the ravages of the river without protest. They have never learned to fight it, to tame it. If they can find out, with our help, Mr. Kabaku, that their power is greater than the river's, can you comprehend what a spark it will give them? They will become ambitious. They will think of new vistas."

"Perhaps you are right. I have learned one thing. It is better to do things, to act, than to contemplate."

She did not respond to this wisdom. She said,

"I need your help, Mr. Kabaku."

"I shall be happy to be of any help to you."

"You are an African. In Kenya and other African countries you must be thinking of mobilizing human resources for nation-building activity. We are poor in everything. But we have people. This is our wealth. And we must utilize this wealth. If you come with me and tell these government people that a dam is what this village needs most, they will probably act."

"But, Miss Dutt, I really know nothing about the problem of flood control."

"Nor do I. That does not mean we don't have to control the flood."

"No."

"You are a visiting officer here. They will listen to you. And you're a foreigner. They always listen to foreigners."

"Miss Dutt, I told you I shall be very happy to be of any use to you."

She seemed relieved.

So it was that the foundation stone of a "minor" dam over an obscure river not far from Delhi was laid. And as the two sparks of idealism joined, a file was born. The delivery was prolonged and difficult, with an unusual length of umbilical cord complicating matters. But it gained weight, after a bad start. When it became very substantial, the file finally reached the large table of Mr. Sukhdev Sharma, Secretary to the Ministry of Irrigation and Power. The file was fed and nurtured at every stage by a zealous and over-excited mother. Peter Kabaku was

at hand all through, reading books and offering what he had learned from them. They dug with groups of villagers. They had to mobilize the human resources with great difficulty. For the villagers lost interest when they discovered that they too would have to dig without wages. They had to persuade, cajole, bribe and threaten the villagers. They brought documentaries in mobile vans to entertain and instruct, and, finally, they persuaded the minister to come all the way from Delhi to open the dam before it was completed. The villagers liked it. It was as enjoyable as an annual festival. A quarrel broke out as to who would be the prettiest girl to garland him.

"Miss Dutt, is it true that while they were about to garland a British Governor, you shot him?" asked Peter Kabaku wiping the sweat from his brow.

## ***FIVE***

Sulochana sat before the mirror in her dressing room, looking at herself for a long time. She did not see the middle-aged woman who faced her. Her age lurked behind her contentment and confusion, wriggling out at times in lines, shadows and droops. She tilted her face this way and that making it catch the light so that it looked less full. She let a film set over her once so dazzling eyes. All the mean and merciless marks of age were left stuck to the image in the mirror. The image which was permitted to reach her retina was that of a young woman: bright and shining as this year's chrome, moledark iris, unjaded eyes hovering on the brink of life, an unused article, full of expectations, always willing to be surprised, price tag discreetly hidden.

Her long nailed fingers let her hair down. The girl she saw was the girl Shukdev had seen in Allahabad a quarter of a century ago, when he had returned to visit his Indian professors, blazer clad and tattooed by the manners of Cambridge.

Sulochana could still hear the sounds in their house that day, could still smell the smells of that day. Her father was a professor of philosophy. His questioning nose was large, the broad tip antennated with hair, that quivered with questioning. He had endowed his daughters with good looks for which the pale unassuming mother could hardly claim much credit.

Her mother bustled around, swishing, whispering and instructing behind the scene, as she prepared to offer sweetmeats and tea to the England-educated aristocrat, Shukdev Sharma. Sulochana was pushed in, shy and coy, modest and downcast, carrying a tray with a grace so Indian and traditional.

Conversation is seldom the forte of the Indian middle class which has little social life beyond its small traditional universe.

Talking has always been looked down upon in Hindu society which respects silence and associates it with wisdom and knowledge. Talking means waste of energy and power; the garrulous is the self-pushing sleek over-smart who glitters but does not shine. This traditional aversion to talking has inhibited the growth of conversation as a social grace among the Hindus. Sulochana's father was a man of tradition, for whom philosophy meant repeating what was written in the ancient books, and he found himself quite at a loss in the presence of his former student. Professor Dwivedi could hardly recognize in the fashionable young man sitting in front of him the boy who used to come first in his class. He was frankly afraid of him now, apprehensive of his moods, wondering how he would react to his daughter. And he spoke in a high-pitched shrill voice, as if he was lecturing before his class on a subject he knew almost nothing about. "Over there in their seats of learning, in England," he was saying, "they have no use for our deep tantric vedantic philosophies... They are the masters of the whole world, and they have a philosophy of life... you know Bentham... he wrote so much on human conduct... but sometimes I think our own great Manu... who said almost the last word on almost everything... what did you say?" Shukdev did not say anything. He was all attention. His eyes hiked up and down her body, resting to catch his breath at the tips of the hillocks and pausing in wonder in the valleys. She was obviously a virgin not only in her body but—Shukdev could swear—also in her mind. While Shukdev was taking a full inventory of her features, stripping her naked, against all her virgin protestations in his hot imagination, her father was rendering a carefully selective commentary on her varied accomplishments. She was modest, shy, and respected the traditional values of Hindu society. "I have never seen her looking at any of these young boys—you know they come to this house... to see me... but they are so different from your batch... I remember the respect you showed us... Sulochana would never look at any one of them... and she goes to the temple of Shiva every week with her mother." Of course Sulochana did nothing of the sort. "She can recite Kalidasa's inspiring description of Shiva... will you do that Sulochana...

just one or two *slokas* . . . (to which Sulochana vigorously said no, using her head rather than her tongue) . . . she is shy . . . you know . . . go on, girl, bring your veena, she plays masterly, I tell you, I have poured a good part of my salaries into the throat of the music master to swell his belly. Her voice is charming, masterly singing, but our Indian maidens should be seen and not heard, ha, ha, isn't it so?" Sulochana did play on the veena, rather badly, for she had really not learned much, but Shukdev was illiterate in the grammar of Indian music, he watched the nervous movement of her fingers, and mentally caressed her well-shaped arm. "She is a jewel, real jewel, I tell you . . . I shall be so dejected . . . in the words of the poet, when she goes to the house of her husband . . . What did you say?" Shukdev this time was trying to say something. "May I talk to Sulochana alone for five minutes, please?"

This was a most unusual suggestion for which Professor Dwivedi was the least prepared. But Shukdev was not only the son of a rich aristocrat of the province, and England-educated, he was a member of the Indian Civil Service, he was part of the British raj, and nothing that he asked for could be refused. So Professor Dwivedi's eyes rolled up to the flanking ceiling, and he spread out his hands in a gesture of fatalistic resignation. The roomful of people trooped out reluctantly, but remained gathered in the adjoining room. Shukdev went up to the door, closed it, returned to his chair, and, watching a perspiring Sulochana with amused satisfaction, asked, "Are you offended? Do you disapprove my wish to have a word with you in private?"

Sulochana moved her head to indicate that she did not.

"That's nice. Thank you. Now, please don't keep looking at the floor. It's not the floor you'll marry. Look at me."

To his very startling surprise, Sulochana looked him straight in the face.

Shukdev fumbled for a moment for words. Sulochana kept looking.

"Before I say yes to your father's proposal—you know what the proposal is (Sulochana smiled faintly, blushed profusely), I want to ask you if you like me . . . if you would like to have me as your husband."

Sulochana bent her head, blushed, smiled, and said nothing. This, she knew, was the traditional way of saying yes to Shukdev's question.

"Well, life for you will be very different as my wife. You will have to learn many new things, and, if I may say so, unlearn some of the things you may have learned in your father's household."

"I know that," Sulochana spoke for the first time during the interview, and Shukdev was pleased with the sweetness of her voice."

"I must ask you another question, and I apologize in advance. Are you in love with anyone else?"

Sulochana looked him straight in the eye, and shook her head negatively.

No life was not easy for Sulochana in the beginning as the wife of Shukdev Sharma ICS. Dress, food, manners, voices and virtues of ICS life had to be learned. Her mother-in-law intimidated her, trained her and disapproved of her. However, Sulochana survived it all, changed, and was soon hardly distinguishable from those who had been born into that particular shelf of society. She had managed well, she thought. She had been lucky.

Sulochana tilted her head to one side, and this time could not ignore the lines of worry on her forehead, the tight anxious smile her mouth was drawn into. She started brushing her hair vigorously, up and down, stroking a raven's back. Long hair, reaching below her waist and covering her buttocks. Long strokes, up and down, up and down, carding the oiled strands. A smile hurried across her face as she remembered the early days, when she had tried to play tennis, and how Shukdev had teased her, describing her clumsy attempts at wielding the racket as combing the hair of the wind rather than hitting the ball. How she hated tennis. How bad for the body, thickening the arms and legs, encasing one in muscles like a warrior in a coat of mail. She had used all her ability for lies to avoid the endless invitations for games of tennis. Shukdev was District Magistrate at that time, and it was part of her duty to play tennis with her husband's colleagues and friends.



Those evenings of dancing and squeezing, of banter and snubs from superior officers' wives and the lewd suggestiveness of the drunk officers. Had she enjoyed it all? It was her duty, part of the requirements of being her husband's wife, and from her childhood she had been brought up to fill this role of being a wife. Still, Lord, it had not been easy. She had been brought up in middle class puritanism, on middle class morals. It was not easy for her to accept Shukdev's rather lusty taste for liquor and wines. Drunk, he was more demanding in bed, and she would feel like being drained of all her humanity. It had been more difficult to obey Shukdev's wish to drink herself, or at least to sip from a glass of Scotch at parties. Her spirit revolted every time she had to take out Shukdev's sight-seeing friends. Although they would be driven in the official car, and besides the driver, a bearer would always go with them, she never felt at ease alone with a man other than her husband. She always apprehended the man making a pass, and she was annoyed with her own nervousness. Nothing really happened though... except once... and that too wasn't very much. Nothing at all compared with the other things that happened. Supple fingers braided Sulochana's hair into one thick plait. 1938, wasn't it? Shukdev had been so worried. The Congress formed the ministry in the United Provinces.. Much of Shukdev's gaiety had gone into mocking these people : their babu accent in English, their uncouth manners, and their misplaced patriotism. Officially he had been scrupulously fair in meting out justice. But, of course, the laws were British, the justice British, and what these chauvinistic Congressmen considered severe and inhuman sentences were to him and his English superiors Fairness. Shukdev had been really worried. He dreaded working for this new Congress. Sulochana screwed up her mouth as she remembered the acid mockery Shukdev had sprayed on her when she suggested that he should go to the astrologer to find out what was going to happen. But he went. The astrologer predicted glory and wealth, power and travel. Told him to stay on where he was and that all would be right. Which it was. Shukdev escaped. He was appointed the Governor's private secretary, and, under the Constitution, it was the Governor who actually mattered. Shukdev was

now the arm of the Governor, and his dealings with the Congressites was as an arm of the Governor which no one would openly dare to twist. Sulochana remembered how relieved he had been that this arm would not have to salute the Congress chief minister. He excelled as the Governor's private secretary, zealously guarding every inch of the spacious territory reserved under the Act of the British Parliament for the exclusive command of the Governor. Then war broke out in Europe. India was made part of the war by the British. The Congress ministries resigned in protest. Sulochana sent a nice present to Shukdev's astrologer.

As part of a part of the Empire, Shukdev Sharma battled tirelessly for victory. He was more moved by the eloquence of the speeches in Westminster than by the dumb sound of famine in Bengal as thousands died. Others would remember to accuse him of this later. Shukdev was decorated with the Order of the British Empire at the end of the war, as others were decorated with death. Sulochana did her bit, knitting khaki socks and sweaters, going to tea parties and taking a course in first aid.

She stood up in front of the mirror, unwinding the long, transparent yards of her sari. She glanced at the pink velvet curtains that hung behind her dressing table. They were black at that time, for the black-outs, raids and rumors that the Japs would attack India.

The war was over, but the black curtains still remained for some months. It was into this darkened room that Shukdev had returned one evening, bringing with him the debris of a world collapsed. The Order of the British Empire had been knocked away. The waves rose higher and higher; a man called Gandhi was the center of the storm. The Labor Government in Westminster announced the liquidation of the Indian empire. The Sharmas were engulfed.

Shukdev told her of his conversation with the Governor.

"But my dear Sharma," Sir John Barrett had said briskly, "You know we did not come here for ever. Even Warren Hastings visualized the day when India would be free. And now, old boy, the day has come. I must say I am rather stunned. Numbed, you know, can't quite take it all in. Things are going

to be damned difficult, with all these religious killings, and with Pakistan. But I've no doubt you will all pull through. There's something glorious about all this, don't you agree?"

"Rather," Shukdev had echoed obediently. "It is indeed rather glorious. I can also see the Hindus and Muslims devouring each other as soon as the British leave. I wonder what's going to happen to us. Do you think any of them will have forgotten what we did to them? Jail detentions and all that?"

"Now look, Sharma," Sir John had spoken sharply, "Don't lose your grip. You know as well as I do that this is an inevitable part of order, of the reality of change. I wouldn't worry too much if I were you. Nehru realizes the importance of the civil service. He knows that the three great legacies we are leaving behind are the army, the civil service, and British justice. He can't build a new India except on these strong, sound, secure foundations. In other words, they can't do without you boys."

Two days later Shukdev and Sulochana created a sensation at a dinner in Government House. It was the Governor's birthday.

Mr. Sharma was dressed in a long high-collared coat made of coarse homespun *khadi*, a symbol of new India. And white pajamas. Mrs. Sharma wore an austere *khadi* sari with a shapeless blouse, no make up, and with downcast eyes she was defiantly Indian. There were gasps, murmurs and whispers as they moved through the brightly lit halls and the peacock turbaned servants broke through their cages and snickered for a moment.

Lady Barrett who was not anything less than unapproachable, beads on an intimidating bosom, beckoned Sulochana to her side. She said with toothy imperiousness, "Well, my dear, are you mourning for us before our demise? We are celebrating tonight and you look distinctly funereal. Or have you joined the Congress... before we've even left?"

"His Excellency has asked my husband to move with the times," murmured Sulochana, as humble as ever.

"Oh, has he?"

"Yes, and I told my husband that we must at least dress with the times."

"Aren't you clever?" was Lady Barrett's final comment.

Sulochana's belly was like a summer river bed, the skin sandy coloured. She had just come out of the bathroom after having a shower. She looked at herself naked, which is something she rarely did, she had a modesty toward herself. But tonight, these nights, she needed reassurance; she was being forced into an awareness which she was trying to grope her way out of. Again she did not see. She did not see the droop of her breasts, her withered teats.

Was it she who had changed? Was it Shukdev? Or was it something much larger, dimmer, more unknown, more unknowable—like India—that had changed? Shukdev had changed, no doubt. He was moving further and further away from her. He changed imperceptibly, as a river changes its shape, and one day one notices that there is a wide meadow separating it from its banks that had not been there before. Changes that had left the mould of their marriage intact, the habits, the dependencies, the language and the acts of intimacy were still there. But inside all this was an emptiness. She could not reach him. She could not touch him except with dead fingers of the past.

She started suddenly as the telephone rang. So late at night. She ran through her room pulling a nylon dressing gown about her and picked up the receiver. Shukdev was on tour, and the children were sleeping, or should be.

A dark, gritty voice said, "Can I speak to Sheila?"

"Who is speaking?" her voice was hard and disapproving.

"A friend of hers."

"What is your name? She went to bed hours ago. Please don't ring up again so late at night."

"I am sorry," said the young man, "It was quite urgent... otherwise I wouldn't..."

"There can't be anything so urgent that can't wait till tomorrow."

It was only when she had got back to her room that she realized that he had not told her his name. What was her daughter coming to, and who were all these weird people she mixed with? Urgent, at this time of night! Shukdev could have had so much more effect on Sheila if only he would talk to her and find out what she was up to, but of course, he just

did not have the time. He never had much time for the children, he had not been with her when they were born. An absentee father, very fond of them and all that, but he needed an intermediary in his dealings with them. Sulochana was becoming increasingly ineffective as the intermediary. Time and again she had tried to tell Shukdev about the queer friends Sheila had, all sorts of Persians and Arabs and Burmese and Indonesians, and, who knows, African Negroes. Most of her Indian friends were quite beneath her status, sons and daughters of clerks, writers, and perhaps the postman even. And she spent too much time reading novels and other odd books. Shukdev pretended to hear, but she knew he was not listening. Whenever she herself tried to talk to her daughter, Sheila would bring out her thorny shield of sarcasm and poor Sulochana would get scratched.

She prepared for bed. Her worries were too much for her. Life really was very difficult. The telephone call had been quite upsetting. She looked at her husband's photograph on the table. Tears of self-pity and nostalgia filled her eyes. What was he doing now? He was spending the night at the high dam at Bhakra, after a day's very hard work, she had no doubt—conferences, discussions, inspections, parties...and was he sleeping well? She sat on the edge of her bed, their bed. What if Shukdev was having an affair with some woman? There were bizarre foreign women at these dam sites, wives and daughters of the experts, or perhaps their mistresses, who had a stint for Indian men. And Shukdev, she knew, had a weakness for foreign, white women. She remembered Cynthia, and her tongue burned. That slut of a woman who had stolen Shukdev from her in her own house, Mother Kali will destroy her one day in the most cruel way. It wasn't Shukdev's fault, it was hers, Cynthia's. She was a temptress, and knew all the arts of seduction. Sulochana suddenly realized how wanting she had been as a wife in some respects. She was too modest and shy in love-making; she wanted to get, she could hardly give shamelessly. After their marriage how strongly she used to struggle when Shukdev wanted to strip her naked with the lights on. Men were animals. They all are. They want the woman to be an animal at night, and an angel by day. Cynthia was mysterious, and

Shukdev fell for her. Perhaps I am no longer mysterious to him, she thought. She stared at the old photographs of Shukdev which stood in rows in silver frames. Shukdev, young and lean, in riding clothes and solar topee at the time when he used to ride round the villages to get to know the "people". Shukdev, still and like a dumpny, in formal clothes with a formal smile for some function. And there, her favorite snap of Shukdev, reclining against a bolster on the floor, dressed in tight churidars and loose silk kurta, staring with inky bonfires in his eyes—he could almost be a poet. She was overcome with poetic sentimentality which soon turned to poetic sadness when she thought there was none of that left in him now. None.

There was that time, soon after the famous dinner at Government house. Shukdev had been cloistered in his study, evening after evening, sometimes until three in the morning. At night he would lie tossing and sleepless. He would not answer any of her questions. He would not make love. This routine continued for several weeks. He turned the pages of many books and chewed up at least a dozen pencils. He was undergoing a severe moral crisis.

One afternoon he sunk exhausted into an armchair and asked Sulochana to give him a stiff whiskey. She did, although it was early in the afternoon, because basically she was a good wife, and she had been worried about him. He then told her he had written an article. He had finished it. He said it was about the function of a civil servant. He had defined a new set of values, and he had quoted from the *Gita* about the duties of man and the fruit of his labor, and he had praised Motilal Nehru and the ideals of his son. She could not understand what it was all about but she knew that it was a revolutionary article which had caused a stir and everyone was talking about it. The telephone rang constantly for a few days, and Shukdev, when he was at home, was either accepting congratulations or defending his arguments. He was interviewed by reporters, and his picture appeared in the newspapers. The consequences were serious, but soon everyone forgot about it, as it is the fate with most serious matters.

Shukdev was transferred to the central secretariat in New

Delhi, and was given the job of doling out land and straightening out some of the many complexities arising out of the partition of India. He worked twenty-six hours a day. Much of Shukdev's affinities had been Islamic, being born and educated in Lucknow. Now he worked with the fury of a dedicated demon, with inhuman perseverance to save every inch of land for India, denying everything he could to Pakistan. Even his personal Muslim friends found him completely unyielding in his passionate new-found patriotism. He was rewarded.

Sulochana was a woman. She accused him of forgetting his Muslim friends—privately of course. She said a Muslim friend's wife, a woman too underneath her burkha, had come to her saying, tears flowing behind the string lattice of her veil, we have lost everything in the riots, and asked for compensation. Shukdev told her he could do nothing, for her son had gone away to Pakistan, and soon, he knew for certain, the rest of the family would go too. He told her that he believed, personally, though not as a government servant, that all Muslims should go to Pakistan, and all Hindus come to India, and he found little moral ground to befriend persons whose sympathies lay entirely with Pakistan. Shukdev was now moved only by great inanimate forces like duty, patriotism, and independence.

That pale frayed girl who used to work with Sulochana when she went to do good in a slum on the outskirts of Delhi. What was her name? Pale girl whom everyone liked, a girl gentle and silent, with the saddest eyes she had ever seen. What was her name—Sarla, no, not Sarla. Something like that. How thin she was. Sulochana had noticed the people there looking with suspicion at her own glowing skin, her well fed body and her long painted nails. Even Sulochana with her armor of privileges could not but admit that she could not help them in the way this sad wispy girl did. How like a moth she was, wings torn and dusty with fluttering against a brick wall; frayed she was . . . oh, she could not remember her name . . . frayed. Just like the white whisk of a moustache of that playwright who had come to see Shukdev. He was frayed too. An old friend of her father's, this playwright. Famous in his day, people had flocked to see his plays. But now he was played out. For many years he had

wanted to set up a drama center. The government had shown some interest in the idea, as the government showed an interest in all good ideas, and there had been vague promises, assurances, flatteries, platitudes, and miles of correspondence. But no help. For years the man had tried. Suffocated in office corridors, writing letters, being bounced from one clerk to another, from one ministry to another until he was old, frayed and... disappointed. Shukdev was a very important man. He could get it through with a bat of his eyes. Sulochana was the daughter of his good old friend, Professor Dwivedi, of Allahabad.

He sat outside on the verandah, on a cane chair, his dhoti grey with dust, his lips cracked with heat and stained with betel juice, his body shaking because he was old. He sat with the peculiar patience of a man who had waited too long. The servant said something to Sulochana. She came out into the verandah and greeted the old man affectionately. He had risen quickly with hope and murmured, a voice of resignation and pleading, patted her on the cheek and wiped his watery eyes.

Sulochana had gone inside and after a while a servant had come out with some coffee and sweetmeats. The old man had drunk the coffee lapping it noisily from the saucer, wiped his eyes, and waited. After an hour or so, a man, smart and swift, had come briskly on to the verandah, strode past him trailing a smell of shaving lotion and clean linen, and had deftly folded himself into the back seat of a large limousine which had started up and gone down the drive, while the old man was still getting up from his chair eagerly, full of hope. And as the car snaked through the front gate, the old man stood foolishly in front of his cane chair and wiped his eyes. Sulochana had come out and told him gently that her husband had to rush away to a very important and urgent meeting with the minister, but that he would see him at the office at twelve twenty-five. She chatted with the old man, she offered him food, he shook his head, his moustache twitching with the jerky nods of his head. Soon afterwards he got up, thanked Sulochana, wished her eternal happiness, long life of her husband, and many children, and walked down the red gravel driveway in his grey dhoti.

That evening she asked Shukdev while he was sipping



whiskey and skimming through some papers, "Did he come to see you?"

He grunted.

"Did he come to see you?"

"Did who come to see me? I see twenty-five different people every day."

"That old man, the old friend of Father's...the famous playwright."

"No, no, he did not come...and how many times do I have to tell you Sulochana, I will not have people...your people... coming to ask favors of me in the house. I have got enough to do and can't listen to everyone's hard luck story...there are more important things to be done for this country."

"What about that man...Mr. Dubey...who came to the house yesterday? You saw him."

"That was different. Dubey had a letter from a minister in Lucknow."

"And my father is not a minister in Lucknow."

"That's right, and I just do not have the time to waste arguing about these petty things... Your man... your father's man did not come when he was asked to..."

"Yes," she said, "I knew he would not come."

Come, come, not come... Kamala, that was it, that was her name, the pale moth girl, Kamala. One day this girl had told her how her father, on the eve of his retirement, had died without notice, and how for two and a half years, she had waited for the five years' family pension that was his due, and how it still had not come through. They had brothers and sisters, and they all lived in one little room. She had asked Sulochana whether Mr. Sharma could not perhaps do something about it, for her father used to be a clerk in Mr. Sharma's ministry.

Shukdev had said irritably while looking through his usual bunch of papers, "There must be some flaw in the case for the pension to be delayed for so long."

"There is no flaw in the fact that the man died before he could claim his pension and that this pension is his family's right, and that not a pie has been paid for two and a half years."

"Look... my dear, the government is not administered by

compassion but by rules and regulations." He retreated into the importance of his papers and lit a cigarette.

Sulochana did not give up.

"Rules and regulations are made by people for people. Rule without compassion is tyranny."

He looked at her sharply. "Sometimes, Sulochana, you say things without knowing their meaning. Perhaps social work in the slums is turning your head, and you will one day be a blooming socialist politician. I'll tell you what. You must not bring all these trivial cases to me. I am inundated with work, involved with projects dealing with millions of rupees, schemes dealing with millions of human beings, which will change the ancient dried up face of India, and make deserts and jungles bloom into townships. I really can't deal with your little cases of pensions or what not."

"But... this girl really needs money... she does."

But Shukdev was not listening.

"Could I ring up your secretary and ask him to look into...?"

Shukdev cut her short.

"You cannot. Please do not try to run my office."

Sulochana gave up going to that slum. She could not face that wispy pale Kamala. She could not tell her that she had failed to influence her husband. She could tell her a lie—tell her that she had spoken to Mr. Sharma, and she hoped something would now happen; but that would only make the poor girl hope and Sulochana could not persuade herself to give her false hope.

More than Kamala—was she still alive or did she die of some disease—what tormented her tonight was her own inadequacies as a woman. Shukdev had become indifferent. Wasn't this her fault as a woman? He had become entirely involved with his work. He met only very important people, or those who came with letters from them; he travelled endlessly all over the country and in many parts of the world; he poured over maps and charts and drawings; he was flattered, admired and feared as a very important person. In his own turn, he flattered and admired the ministers in public and derided and ridiculed them in private; he was convinced that it was they—the few hundred Shukdevs—and not the politicians—who were building the new India.

She looked again at his photograph. What was he doing now? Sleeping? Working? He must not work so hard. He might be felled by a heart attack. But he won't listen, and she had no power over him. She got up from her bed and moved restlessly toward the window and looked out. Strange luxuriant velvet night... she was seeing it, suddenly, with younger eyes, an ancient brocade of night noises, the night owl hoooots, the silvery exotic leaves shimmer, the peacock calls "leon", the moonlight falls in rippling showers on the ancient marble lament, but, of course, this was not the Taj, only a house on Rajpath, a house that was lonely with a lonely woman keeping vigil on her vanishing hold on a man. Shukdev... why don't you come?

## SIX

"No, Mr. Kabaku, it is not true."

They were sitting in Miss Dutt's hut. A little oil lamp was burning underneath a picture of a bluey orange Goddess Durga, many-armed with the blind eyes of a mask. The rest of the room was aglow with a warm furry brown. They were sitting on the floor smoothed with caked mud. The only furniture was a string bed which cast thick black shadows. In a corner was a small tin trunk with Miss Dutt's belongings, and next to it a wooden shelf with a tin of oil, tins of wheat flour and lentils, and a few bottles of condiments. Insects, escaping, chasing, exploring. Thatched roof flecked with needles of ochre and gold. The only piece of color was the bright image of the benignly avenging Durga. Miss Dutt had just given Peter Kabaku a dinner of rice and beans. They sat facing each other, Kabaku's leg had gone to sleep, and the pricking and poking of his blocked circulation made him grimace. Miss Dutt whose own feet had turned solid with cold, nevertheless mistook these grimaces for expressions of deep emotions.

"No, Mr. Kabaku," she said, watching his face in the dim brown light. "I shot him while he was riding his mare into Government House. As the mare and the Governor fell, I fired another shot that hit a sentry in the arm. Rivers of blood flowed. The wounded mare was neighing pitifully, and as the guards rushed to free the body of the pinioned Governor, I fainted. When I came to, I found myself surrounded, and saw the Governor limping into his house. He had a sprained ankle, and a tremendous nervous shock, and I was sentenced to death by hanging. Later, my sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. I was still in my teens, and the British are civilized people. They let me out soon before independence. Seven years I spent in jail."

Miss Dutt recounted this with coolness. Her flabby flesh dozing peacefully on the ground.

"You did believe in violence, then, didn't you?" Peter Kabaku asked with a certain eagerness.

"I don't remember. It seems so long ago. Perhaps I did. I was too young. Perhaps I did not believe in anything. I really do not remember."

She sounded helpless, almost in pain.

"How was it to be in prison?"

"I enjoyed those seven years. I enjoyed my deed. I was a heroine of the national struggle. Even Gandhi came to my defence, and criticized the judge who had sentenced me to death. I would have enjoyed dying by hanging."

Peter Kabaku felt a shiver running down his spine. He was about to ask something, but Miss Dutt had not finished.

"My father was a follower of Gandhi, he had never time to take much notice of me. He was a man obsessed with great ideas—of non-violence and saintliness. My mother died soon after I was born. She never had a chance to do anything, except to cook for my father, and lie on her bed, for she had no strength, poor thing, except to pray. I tried to be useful to my father, but he had no need for me. He lived on milk and fruits, and vegetables which he would eat raw. They all took notice of me after my deed, even my father. Of course, he was disappointed and angry. When they offered him a ministry, he refused, and said he was going to join an *ashram*, for he despised power, he was a holy man. He is old now, and quite infirm. He tells everyone that his daughter died during the fight for independence."

"That's what I am trying to look for, you know," Peter released his dead leg with a sharp grimace, and changed his sitting posture, "your fight for independence. The fire. I see so little of it. Where is it gone, Miss Dutt?"

"All those fires are dead," she said with imponderable seriousness. "All those days when the fire was burning in us is gone. The ideas remain like empty paraffin drums, and even those are scarce today. All about me I see postures, greed, avarice, selfishness—yes, men still sacrifice, they sacrifice their dignity, their

spiritual values in order to get coveted permits for factories, to get frigidairees."

Miss Dutt looked abashed. She saw her audience reduced to the single dark figure opposite her. She needed something for her forested upper lip to quiver with life. She looked to the seated figure, and kept reflecting on the death of the fire she had known once, burning, long, long ago.

Peter Kabaku was reflecting too.

"The fire you see nearly extinguished in India today, the same fire is brightly burning in other lands. Mankind is moving forward. You make a mistake if you study mankind bit by bit. The fire is burning in Africa. We must take the light from you, and blaze a new trail. And others will take the fire from us. If you look at human progress in a large context, you will not be disappointed."

Peter Kabaku sat back satisfied. He had repeated what he had written to Wachira in his latest report. He looked for a response from Miss Dutt. None came. Miss Dutt was lifting her large hips from the floor. She loosened the shawl about her shoulders, tried to push back her untidy hair with cold hands. She did not look at him. She moved to her paraffin stove, lit it, and put some water on to boil. Peter felt dejected. The words he had said a moment ago sounded hollow, and his doubts began to eat him again. He felt very sad. Miss Dutt came back with two metal glasses of tea. She looked at the revolutionary face filled with sadness, blankly. She sat down again, then sipped her tea noisily. Peter left his to cool.

Is there anything in India that Africa needed to learn, borrow or steal, or must Africa find its own way, light its own fire, burn, die, kill, and dream? He thought for a long time. When he remembered his tea, and made haste to drink it, for it had gone too cold, he saw that Miss Dutt's chins were dissolving into her bosom. She was tired, after a long day's hard work, thought Peter. He got up, heroically coping with the shooting pins and needles, put his glass neatly to the side, and said in a deep voice, "You are tired, Miss Dutt, you must go to sleep. We have much work tomorrow. Good night."

"I'm not tired, and I am not sleepy," she protested feebly.

"You are a brave woman, Miss Dutt. The more I see you, the more I know you, the more I respect you. There is much work to be done. For this village. For all villages in India. You must rest well. Good night."

"Good night, Mr. Kabaku," she said absently.

Peter Kabaku went to his hut. And while the dogs of the village accompanied him out of sight, with the noise of hungry curs, a heap on the floor of a hut with a little oil lamp, melted deeper into itself until it was no more than a bundle, homespun; and a milk-stained orifice through which a wheezing whistle came and went with infinite patience.

After a couple of hours, in the stillness of a November night, in the silence of the cold, the lamp guttering and out, the bundle woke up with a start, and stirred itself with grunts, changed its position several times, the side-pieces of the string net creaking, and lay awake, staring into the naked darkness. A woman, in her middle age, hard-earned sleep smashed in the middle of arid night, lay thinking, not about the dam, or the village. But about a man.

She could feel the sand in her breath, between her eyeballs and eye-lids, burning and narrowed against the June heat. She was walking with dreary steps down a hawking bleached summer street in Delhi. She was carrying a cone made of torn newspaper. In the cone were the remains of oily fried lumps of corn flour spiced with green chillies. She had not eaten them all because she was already panting with thirst and the lumps of food were setting themselves like stones in her pouchy stomach. Her feet were cracked and burning.

It was a few years after she had come out of prison and she moved about the streets like a creature on a leash, expecting any minute, wanting every minute to be pulled back into that prison which is the one place she had been content. She had also got into the habit of talking to herself inside her head, with her lips mutely echoing the words. The brick and stone and plaster of the houses and shops were hissing with the hoarded heat of the day. The white heat that at its hottest had a weird abandonment.

Her strength was sapped. The evening offered no respite.

She was walking back to the hostel where she shared a room with a friend. A place so dismal that even a cockroach might object to its dinginess. But she did not mind it, because in peculiar ways it reminded her of prison.

They would put their string beds out on the gravel courtyards with scarcely a few inches between one bed and the next, rows of beds, and try and sleep under the dust laden sky which pressed layers of hot air onto their dry spinsterly bodies. Each woman there, fastidious, going through rituals of obsessive fads, some sluttish, their secret vices gnawing into their stunted single lives. And yet each one of them had acted in a dramatic and dramatized role in the impressionistic play called the Freedom Struggle. Prison life brought out the raw in them, and they clung to their own images of actors, each claiming to have hurt a mortal blow to the British raj, and each demanding that the mortally wounded raj must treat her well. She was one of them, in most ways, though not in all. She had known and not understood her skin bristling and her nipples hardening when Radha who had been arrested with a group of political dacoits, had affectionately caressed her in the prison. These were only wintry buds of sensuality, barely sexual, which would never open. But her emotions were like that too, never having matured beyond the inexplicable absence of her mother, when she was a child. She had been lonely even as a child, nursing her grievances against everything secretly in her mind, she was strong in body, and had been easily drawn into a secret group of political terrorists in Punjab that was acting in collusion with a larger group in Bengal. They trained her in pistol shooting, and taught her to hate the British, and she learned easily because she hated almost everything. Before she was a woman, she was cast in the role of an actor in a great drama that fascinated her, inspired her, excited her, and which she understood only in terms of her personal and group reaction to a sinister abstraction. It was in prison that she was confronted with herself. She read, she thought, she just lived with a vacant mind at times, she had no contact with the outside world of reality. Like most Indian girls, she repressed her sex, but this did not trouble her because she was asexual, her body never awoke, and her passion was



diverted, became brackish and stagnant as a backwater. Her unused body became over-blown.

While she was walking in that street, wondering whether she would put another of the fried lumps into her mouth to get rid of the taste of sand, a man stood before her, and said, "Guru Nanak! Is it not Asha Dutt of great revolutionary fame? It must be, if there is God in heaven! Don't you remember me? After all these years, your playfellow from Lahore? Of course you don't! The famous and the great do not remember the small and the little. I am the fool who could only play, and was so stupid that you couldn't even talk to him. Ratan, don't you remember Ratan?"

She remembered. She felt like coming to after a long faint. She remembered. Ratan. The Rat. The Charming Rat. Son of a rich lawyer land-owner. He had a mother huge and overpowering, laden with jewelry, stentorian and permanent as an Egyptian pyramid. He would wear silk cravats, dress in the style of English gentlemen, with grey pin stripes and tight waistcoat and superbly cut coat swooping in at the waist and crocodile leather shoes. He was always making jokes and giggling at them, he said smutty things even in the presence of girls, and laughed loudly, he was able to drink graciously, was well-known for his generosity, able to discuss fashion with the ladies, commiserate with them about their servant problem, and regarded all his friends with the earnest conviction that they were all geniuses. They lived near her father's house, in their huge, ugly, forbidding building, where peasants came in numbers every morning to mortgage their land to his greedy, oily-eyed father. He was in the same college with her, senior to her by several years, but he seemed never to be able to pass his final exam, and thus eventually, before her great deed, they were even class-mates. He was ridiculed, laughed at and liked because he quarrelled with none, and gave away money in large quantities. She avoided him at first, for his foolery and his silly jokes and hearty laughter, but she became suddenly aware of him when her group leader asked her to raise money urgently needed for the revolution. She remembered. She accosted him one day in the college cafeteria, and, to his utter astonishment, asked him to accompany her

to her home. Her father was away, on a saintly mission, and he was nervous to be with her alone in her house. She told him about India, about the insult and suffering that was her political bondage, of the brutalities and inhumanities of the British, of the plight and misery of their countrymen. He listened with his mouth open, not understanding anything, but marvelling at her passion for something he did not understand. He nodded his head vigorously approving everything she said. His face froze with fear and melted with excitement when she told her of her secret group and of its revolutionary aims, using emotive phrases, quoting Gandhi, Lala Lajpat Rai, and Jawaharlal Nehru. Then she asked for a donation. He put his trembling hand into his pocket, and brought out a large hundred rupee note, pressed it into her hands, murmuring, "This is all I have just now." She was delighted with her success. He said, "Guru Nanak! Whoever thought you could do such things? Will I be in trouble?" To which she replied coolly, "No. But you just not whisper a word of this to anyone. We have our people all over this city. We will know the moment you let out the secret. And then..." She said the rest in a neat posture of her hands. He shivered, and promised, "Never. Never a word from me."

Had he kept his promise? She did not know. She had taken more money from him, on several occasions and every time, she repeated the warning, and he his promise. She lost track of him, as of the world, after she shot the mare's thigh and was in jail.

"Of course I remember you!" she exclaimed, surprised at the exuberance that came out of her parched throat. "How are your parents? What are you doing in Delhi?"

She looked with shame at her dirty torn sari, which not even the June heat would excuse. She looked at her paper bag with the grease oozing out. She rubbed streaks of grease and dirt into her brow as she tried to tidy her dank hair. She looked at him, and smiled.

"My parents are up there." He pointed to the heat-distorted sky. "They did not go of their own accord. At least my mother did not, for she wouldn't move from our mansion during the riots, so the Muslims killed her and ran out with all our carpets."

"Hé Ram," she moaned. "I am very sorry to hear this."

"We lost all our lands. We lost all our money. We lost all the gold that my father had hidden away, in specially made bars, in the waterpipes of the basement. Perhaps the gold is still there, but of course I can't go to Lahore to look for it. We lost our houses. In a word, we lost everything, except this relic of a fool standing before you." He laughed, but it was a lifeless laughter, and she looked at him more closely.

She saw a painfully thin man, balding, with old manners that were now out of place. His fine brown hair was receding. Eyes that had been flecked with lights of humor and life were brooding like hermits in overgreen caverns, unnaturally bright; his cheeks were hollow with triangles of weariness. His slender figure was bowed and shrunk. He wore the shapeless white trousers and bush shirt which was the uniform of clerks. She could have said, instead of him, "I am a clerk—in the ministry of rehabilitation."

His voice was reedy, and he was constantly clearing his throat. When he laughed—he still did laugh—his lips withered over his teeth.

They walked on together. Talking. Ratan was out of his wits with delight to meet someone who knew his past, someone who did not see him as a clerk. They talked about those days. She felt a new sensation pulsing through her flesh as he narrated how he had reacted to her deed, to her arrest, her death sentence. She could see him reviving, bright spots of colour coming to his cheeks. He became feverish in his enthusiasm, coughed a good deal, and finally seeing her at the high iron gates of the hostel, took her leave with the elaborate ritual of a past generation. And, even afterwards, he lingered.

"Shall we meet again?"

"Yes."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"May I call you Asha?"

"Certainly. That's how you called me anyway."

"That was long ago. In another world."

They saw each other the next day and often after that. He

would come each time with some little gift. She would see that he ate better, made him drink milk. She felt elated when she saw some of the old gaiety come back to him, when she saw he took more care of his appearance and shadows of the old elegance reappeared, when he spoke excitedly, always fast and always with a grandiose lack of realism, about his future, in which he surreptitiously included her future. They went through the rest of June walking the dry pavements. They ate melons, and Ratan would make up absurd little ditties about ice of the pavement. He was always feverish when he talked.

He talked mostly of his dreams, his future. He was fighting, Guru Nanak, he was fighting to live a better life. He was fighting to get compensation for the property his family... he... had lost in Pakistan. It was only a matter of time. He would get... he must get... plenty of money. He was saving money... hard-earned money... to buy land, and one day, when he got his compensation, he would build factories. He was thinking in terms of exporting Indian textiles to America, there was... there must be much money, in that. His dreams were big and desperate, like his gaiety was.

The rains came in July. They celebrated by becoming two of the wettest creatures ever to walk through the brown water that gushed over the pavements and macadam.

Ratan took her to his room.

His room was small. His clothes hung on a string. He had a pitcher of water on a three-legged stool. His sheets were soiled, indeed they were so dirty you could not tell their original colour. The room was full of ants and cockroaches, and stale bits of bread thrown about to keep the insects happy. She recoiled with disgust. She remembered the prison.

He was happy and nervous like a child to have her in his room. He flew about, bedraggled, his thin hair hanging into his eyes, his cheeks glowing with the bright red spots she no longer noticed. He coughed, he chattered, he rushed about picking up bits of clothing and clearing a place for her to sit. His hands were clammy and beads of sweat had taken possession of his whole face. He rushed out saying he would be back in a minute. He rattled down the stairs, coughing and humming.

She looked around the room. She did not like it. She looked out of the window and saw a very effeminate and dissipated youth peering out of the room opposite. She looked at her hands, finding nowhere else she could rest her eyes without a feeling of displeasure. Her fingers lay like still pieces of chalk. She could scribble all over the walls, over people's faces, over the dirt, over the floor, she would gouge out black eyes, then perhaps her father would take notice of her.

He came in carrying two cups of tea, and some cheap squashed pastries that tasted like rancid cardboard, but she ate two of them. Outside the rain was building columns which supported a grey sky carrying a deluge in its belly. They finished their tea, and fell into humid silence.

He suddenly came up to her, his eyes insanely bright, put his hands on her wet shoulders and kissed her full on the mouth. His lips were feverish and hot. They singed her virgin mouth that knew no delight but that of sweat and salt, and she spat out ashes. He saw her disgust. He became pale and the burning spots on his cheeks flamed like a dying explosion.

He babbled. About his future. He said he needed her hand to help him. She had political influence. The ministers knew her. He needed her hand for his export business. For the compensation he was fighting for. She tried to remove the disgust from her face, the horror in her heart, but could not. He saw it again. He wanted perhaps to ask her to join him, was that it, and then he had seen the nakedness of her face and had changed all his words into official phrases, was that it? She pulled her patchy quilt from her face. She was sweating. The night was hot outside, heaving huge sighs of heat. She tried not to think, not to live again what followed. She could see nothing outside. She saw only his eyes, full of a desperate supplication which she shut out with her disgust. She had never been kissed by a man. Her body, past its prime, her upper lip dark, her eyebrows thickening with age, her body had recoiled in horror and disgust at the touch of a man. It was so sudden, and she was so unprepared. And now it was too late. What might have been was destroyed by his words.

He came to her again, kissed her again, full on the lips, his

burning face touching her cold withdrawn flesh. He put his head, wet and oily, against her jutting full breasts. During the first kiss she had stood like a wax image, and he had watched her expression spread over her face like oil spilling from a punctured drum. And this time, her hand jerked toward him with a tormented spasm of revulsion, and she pushed. He fell on the floor. She clutched her dry breasts. He coughed. She would never know whether he wept or whether it was the effort of his coughing fit. He did not get up, he just coughed and coughed, lying like that on the dirty floor. He brought his shirtsleeve to his mouth, and spat a little blood. Then a little more.

She ran out of the room. He was consumptive, of course. He did not love her, how could he, all he wanted was her help to get permits and licenses to build up his future. He was using her, as they all used her. He did not really care. How could he? He just saw her as a connection with his past. He thought she could save him as his mother had saved him when he failed in his exams. He did not believe that life could change just like that. That's why he did not notice the dirt in his room, that's why he lived in his feverish, consumptive dreams of unreality.

She ran down the stairs. He did not love her. Let him spit blood. She ran to a taxi. She ran up the stairs of the hostel. She ran to the shower in the communal bathroom of the hostel. Stood under the shower for half an hour, until she was pulled out by a friend who came up and said a taxi driver was waiting for her, and did she want him because he was losing a lot of fares standing in the rain like that. She asked her friend to pay the driver. She lay on her bed, refusing to think of the man she had left lying on the floor.

She fell asleep out of sheer fatigue, and had horrible dreams all night, of which she remembered nothing in the morning except that she had horrible dreams. She went back to the room. It was locked. She stood outside it, wondering if he was dead.

## SEVEN

Sheila woke early the next morning. The air had a nip in it and the sun had not yet dried the heavy dew on the grass. She skipped into the bathroom and put the geyser on for a hot shower. Her mother disapproved of her boisterous movements and often warned her that her flesh would become hard as a wrestler's, but Sheila was not very worried about that yet. The woman who looked after her came in and laid out her clothes for the morning. She had been with the family for a long time, a gift from Shukdev's mother after his marriage. She always called Sulochana 'Rani', out of respect for Shukdev's ancestry rather than any respect for accuracy. She was bad tempered and spent hours giving Sheila lectures on ethics and etiquettes, on how great her father's family was, how thousands feared and respected her grandfather.

The house was very quiet. Sheila asked where her mother was.

"Ranisaheb has gone out for that work with the sweeper people. She told me to see that you're not late for School."

So, thought Sheila, frightened and excited, Mummy has gone on one of her social work mornings, that makes things much easier. I shall just skip college, there's nothing really important on today, only that silly essay on Coleridge which I haven't done anyway—there'll be hell to pay when Mummy comes back, but I won't think of that now.

"How is it you haven't got School today?" the woman asked Sheila. "What nonsense, *Baba*, today is not a holiday, and Ranisaheb said specially to see you went off in time."

"How many times do I have to tell you, Hemlata, that I go to college and not school? And it is a holiday, only I forgot to tell mother. It's the birthday of one of our national leaders.

That was a long time ago, before you were born, so you won't know about it. Oh, look that silly cook has sent me a fried egg when I want a rumble tumble."

She ate her breakfast quickly avoiding the eyes of the suspicious old woman, and then walked out into the garden with bravado.

"My father was an Englishman  
Whose blood was hot from warriors  
My mother, a dark African  
Whose blood was sluggish and deplasmalized."

A voice, rich and strong, was singing with great gusto from somewhere behind the great house. The tune changed from line to line and sounded an odd mixture of tunes she was on the point of recognizing but which changed before she had a chance to pin it down. But there was a marvellous swing to it.

"Ooooh whose blood was sluugeesh and  
deplasmalized.

But, I, no African or Engleesh man  
I wander craving for man's love  
Am spurned by Afriican and Englishman,  
And reap the hate I did not sow..."

A long figure in tight trousers and a sweater even more garish than the previous day's tie, came round the back of the guest house. It spotted Sheila, came to a dead stop, and then advanced again.

"Good morning, Mr. Kuchiro," she called out, perversely hoping that he would disappear again and also afraid that he might.

"Good morning, Miss Sharma," he responded. He was ill at ease, but his eyes sparkled and he looked as if he was about to run a race.

"That was an interesting song you're singing," Sheila said primly.

Suddenly aware of his diffidence she became a very confident woman. "But it was such a funny tune, I kept chasing it but could not catch it." She laughed.

He was more at ease. He gave a little bow. They both laughed. And quite naturally, without stiffness or embarrassment they both started to walk round the garden together.



"Because, your majesty, there was a butterfly in my throat who was singing it, and he had never been taught any tunes."

"And I suppose that butterfly also composed the song without any training whatsoever?" Sheila crossed her eyebrows in mock sarcasm.

"No, your majesty, the words of the song have a respectable parentage. They were written by a poet from Ghana."

"It seemed such a sad poem," Sheila commented. "But why 'your majesty?' Do the people of Uganda call each other 'your majesty?'"

"No, no, no," he said, laughing. "But my eyes and lips saw the Queen of Jhansi, and they went on strike and would not say Miss Sharma, but came out with 'your majesty', before I could stop them. They're always getting out of hand."

Sheila was wearing skin tight trousers called *churidars*, and a long shirt and *dupatta*. She was flattered to think she looked like the paintings of the Queen of Jhansi, the heroine of the Indian rebellion against the British in the mid-nineteenth century. She was also surprised at Solomon's natural and unaffected manners in her presence. The Indian young men she met squirmed when talking to a girl, or showed off stupidly, or became quite pathetically tongue-tied. Solomon had a directness and gaiety she had not seen in Indian boys. She felt quite at ease.

"Do you know, Mr. Solomon, that you are not a complete stranger to me?"

"Well, I have been in your house for seventeen hours."

"I see that you are counting the hours and minutes of your stay," Sheila was suddenly embarrassed and angry. "But I didn't mean your visit here which you obviously are not enjoying. I saw you give that lovely African dance at the university."

"I *am* enjoying my stay in your house. Believe me, I am *Now*." He stamped his foot on the green grass as he pronounced the last word. Sheila laughed.

"What's so special about *now*?" she asked cordially.

"*Now* is the eighth day of the week, your majesty."

She was elated, and very pleased with her bold act. She knew Hemlata was watching them from the verandah, and she heard her heart beats asking the question: what'll happen if Mummy

comes home now? She pushed her fears out of her mind, but they still hung in the dark places of her mind like bats, making the scene unreal. This feeling of unreality, however, made Sheila more than usually romantic. It made her bolder than she was.

She led him to a bench at the furthest end of the garden in order to avoid the watching eyes of Hemlata. They sat down on the bench.

"I liked your dance at the university. I wish you'd do it again some time," she said, in order to start a conversation.

He picked up a stick that was lying on the lawn, gave a few blood curdling yells and proceeded to do a fantastic dance, yelping and making terrifying faces. Sheila was first stunned, then afraid, and highly embarrassed. She looked around to see whether any of the gardeners was in sight. She saw Hemlata had come out of the house making a noise like dry sticks being rubbed together. Solomon saw her too and stopped dancing abruptly.

"The world is not exactly friendly if you're a black man from Africa," he remarked, a bit of steel in his voice. She was startled, and saw him eyeing Hemlata with a violent gleam in his eyes. Sheila suddenly felt very guilty.

"She is my mother's maid," she hurried to soothe him. "And quite sweet. She keeps watch on me while I'm home. Has been doing this since I was born. Now it is a habit with her, and she doesn't know, doesn't realize I have grown up, and need no watching any more."

"Do the others realize that?" he asked, his voice still rather steely.

"What d'you mean?"

"Oh, nothing. I suppose it's the same all over the world. They just do not see us as grown up people. They can't. The old folk, I mean."

"You're right. It is terrible, isn't it? In India, we never are allowed to grow up. Until we are married off. Then our husbands treat us as either dolls or like chattel."

"In fact, you know, it is they who haven't grown up. They've only aged."

"Who?" Sheila was apprehensive that he was talking particularly about her parents, and she wouldn't like that.

"Old people everywhere. And the oldest of all, God."

He was gaining back his aplomb. She felt relieved. A certain affinity grew between them. The class consciousness of being young, of demanding a big share of life, and of being denied it by people who seemed to have life completely under their control.

"Have you heard of African witchcraft?" Solomon asked. "The white men of the West think Africa is full of witchcraft. I sometimes do wish I were a witch-doctor. I wish I could chant some chants, spread some herbs, stamp round the fire, and everyone would disappear from the world except...except your majesty and me."

"Come on," she said joining in his laughter. "I would be very afraid to see you as a witch-doctor."

"You wouldn't know of my secret magic."

"Tell me about Africa. It seems so wonderful...all those jungles and forests..."

"We carry within us the wonders we seek without us, there is all Africa and her prodigies in us, said a very, very important poet whose name I forget. Africa is wonderful, must be, since everyone says it is. I know almost nothing about Africa, except that it is huge and drowsy, black and in a thousand ways bleeding. I know something about Uganda. For a really instructive lecture on Africa, you must see a man called Peter Kabaku."

"The man who sent you here, I mean as our guest?"

"Yes. He is our leader, I mean, the Africans living in India."

"How long have you been in India?"

"Eight months and eighteen days."

"Don't like it, it seems."

"Can't say. I don't understand India at all."

"Are we so difficult?"

"More than you know, I dare say. I am baffled, bewildered, overpowered by India."

"I don't understand what makes us so difficult."

"You won't. You are part of it."

"Which means I'm difficult too, and you are baffled, bewildered..."

"And charmed," he made a very stylish bow.

She wasn't very sure this time. She was afraid to explore

him further. He might say things about India she won't like to hear from a foreigner, from him anyway. Underneath his jollity, she sensed a layer of bitterness. She felt sorry for him.

"Where did you go with my parents last night after dinner?"

"I was taken to see the living monuments of Delhi society. They were painted in violet and magenta."

"I can guess who you're talking about." She laughed in happy agreement with his description. "Mrs. Pande."

Encouraged, he became freer and more eloquent.

"And there was Mr. Pande hovering in the back. She's a woman-walrus, so huge that the Government has given her a specially large house. She had a magenta mouth, and you know, her lower lip wobbled up and down all by itself like a plastic toy."

He gave a demonstration that made Sheila cascade into giggles.

"What did she say to you?"

"Well, she offered me some nuts. Mr. Pande, whose hair has been pulled out by his wife, so he keeps stroking his bald pate all the time, asked me in a whisper how I liked India, and I said, 'a mighty lot,' and he was very happy. He was just going to launch into a two-hour whisper speech on India's greatness when your father intervened. Since I had to see some more of Indian society, we had to leave. But meanwhile Mrs. Pande was in caucus with your mother, and from the paleness of her, I mean your mother's, face, I guessed Mrs. Pande had succeeded in planting a towering fear of her African guest in her mind."

Sheila's heart stopped for a moment. Did he know that she had been ordered not to go near him? Was he being made to realize that he was an unwelcome guest? She decided to dismiss the subject, and asked, "Where did you go next?"

"That wasn't very interesting. Just a very elegantly dressed gentleman, smoking and drinking whiskey, and waiting in the living room for his wife to get dressed, for they were going to a late night bridge party. He was very nice to me. He asked me to take a seat, and offered me a drink, which, out of modesty, I refused, and he said I was a good lad, and he was sure I was learning the virtues of prohibition in Gandhi's India. They were having an Armenian poet as house guest, he said, an Armenian

living in the United States, and although he lamented that there was no art or literature in Africa now, he was sure there would be in the not distant future."

"That must be Mr. Shankaran. He speaks English with a mixture of Oxford and Tamil accents."

"Right. That's the name. I said if art began and stopped with some of the paintings one saw—and I looked at the things hanging in his house—of course Africa had no art."

Sheila was glad that Solomon could give it back to Mr. Shankaran while she herself couldn't. She spoke with indignation, "I'm sure Africa has a great culture."

"You know," Solomon said with a sudden air of seriousness, "it's not a question of Indian or Ugandan culture; it's really a question of interplay of cultures. Now, neither your father, nor Mr. Pande, nor Mr. Shankaran is really very Indian. Each one of them is a product of the interplay of several cultures. This makes each one of them rather ambiguous. Frankly speaking, I don't quite get them. They seem to be unreal."

Sheila did not quite understand what Solomon was saying. Her father was very real to her.

She said, "You may be right. I have no great knowledge of cultures. Tell me about yourself."

"What do you want to know?"

"Do you miss your parents very much?"

"I've been missing them since I was born. I have been very lucky for an orphan. An Irish priest picked me up when I was a black blob. He was half a priest, three times a man, and a further fraction of God. He was sure I had a brain in my head and delighted in pricking it into activity rather than cramming it full. And so it is. I am what I am."

Sheila did not know whether she had to sympathize with him for having been brought up as an orphan. Did his parents die or did they—or his mother—just abandoned him? He read her thoughts, and said:

"No, your majesty, the legitimacy of my birth has never been questioned. My parents were respectable people, by African standards. He was chief of a tribe. He and my mother were killed. One of those tribal feuds you must have read about."

"I wasn't thinking about the legitimacy of your birth at all." Sheila protested, blushing. "You are, then, something of a prince."

He smiled broadly, and his white teeth sparkled in the smile. "That's precisely what I have been claiming all these years."

She smiled too.

"What do you intend to do after your exams?"

"I doubt if I'll finish my exams. I hate them. I want to travel round the world, and meet interesting people and beautiful girls... like you. And write."

"Yes! You're a poet. My father told us. I should have remembered."

"I love poetry. I try to write, but I'm not much of a poet yet."

"I must read your poetry. Will you let me?"

"Perhaps. They're not very good, I warn you."

"What do you write about?"

"Oh, of many things. Of women snug in their very thinnest gowns, perfumed and powdered from top to bottom."

"You must be a philanderer."

"I am not. I fall in love with one girl at a time."

"And how many have you fallen in love with, already?"

"More than I can or care to remember."

She was silent, not knowing whether to believe him.

"And you?" he asked.

She did not answer.

They were both silent for a while.

He suddenly rose to his feet, and said, "I have to go to the university. Will you come with me?"

Sheila thought over the matter, and decided that she was not ready to break the unreality of the morning. "Let's go." She got up too. "Be quick. We must leave before my mother comes back."

On the way they stopped at one of the shacks behind Can-naught Circus where they ate unleavened baked bread and spiced meat. They got to the university after almost an hour in a bus. Many people stared at them but they did not notice. Sheila forgot that Solomon was a Negro. His bright vague eyes and huge slopes of his forehead and wild hair all looked quite natural to her. Only once in a while the unreality would explode in her

mind. They talked. Or rather Solomon talked. Sheila listened, or tried to in the noise of the bus and its staring crowd. They went to the library and Solomon showed her photographs of African sculpture, and told her what he knew about it. They went to the canteen, drank Coca Cola, and were silent. They looked at each other, and smiled. The other students stared even more than the people on the bus.

"There is a poem by Gay," Solomon said, half to himself, "I don't know whether I have remembered it right, I am not very good in remembering things"

"If to far India's coast we sail,  
Thy eyes are seen in diamonds bright,  
They breath is Africk's spicy gale,  
They skin is ivory, so white, so white."

They got back home about six in the evening. Sheila had a stomach ache. Her mother came to her room. It seemed for a split second that her mother was going to hit her.

Only Sulochana's voice could be heard. She was hysterical. She came out flushed and completely out of composure. Sheila locked herself in her room and sobbed.

When her father came home she went to see him. Found that Sulochana was there before her. She waited. When he was alone, she went into his study. He was drinking whiskey and looked harrassed. She talked to him at length. Then she walked back to her own room. Shukdev ate dinner with his African guest alone. He told the African that his wife wasn't well. Shukdev fell onto long spells of silence, and Solomon didn't know what to say. Sukhdev looked put out and unsure. Solomon looked alarmed.

Only a while ago, returning from the university, Solomon had watched the evening sky from his verandah. He had been ecstatic and his blood was leaping from pinnacle to pinnacle. It had seemed that he was looking down at the world from a great height, and he had been laughing.

Now he returned to his room dejected, and afraid. The sky was dark, the garden soundless. A dog wailed. Solomon stood alone in a corner of the garden. He became part of the large, mute, painful darkness that surrounded the house.

## ***EIGHT***

Peter Kabaku had many problems. The main one at present could be stated in a single word: belonging. Where do I belong? To Kenya, of course. Is that all? No, to Africa! That's all? No, to Afro-Asia, and to the whole world !! But do I? What makes me a citizen of the world, if there is any such thing? I don't even know great portions of the world, it is a mere abstraction to me, a film on my African eyes. What makes me an Afro-Asian? Just because I have lived in India for two years and more? Without understanding India very much, without being able to make India understand Africa very much, Kenya even less. And India is only a portion of Asia, although India is big and varied. Asia is many. There's Chinese Asia and Arab Asia, and there are smaller Asias and tiny Asias in each Asian land, making Asia a phenomenon rather than a political concept. And what makes me a citizen of Africa? The color of my skin, the pain in my heart? Or am I just a Kenyan, or even more atomized, just a Kikuyu, son of a moramati, guardian of a tribal village or a cluster of villages? I'm that, but, God, not only that, I am, I must be, something more, larger, stronger, more heart-filling. I am... what?

Moyagai Kabaku, his father, was a Kikuyu, and nothing more. Peter could see him sitting in the hut yawning during harvest time, taking from one of his four wives the pipe he smoked through the smoke-haze of the evening cooking, lord of his eighteen children and fifty sheep. He was a true moramati, was his father for he believed in his own little universe and its time-honoured customs and ethics. The whole tribe worked together on the land, sharing the harvest equally in times of war, flood or locusts, and the moramati saw to it.

But Peter was a rebel even when he was a child. Who...



what made me a rebel? Why did I want to go to the missionary school and not to the tribal school? Peter had gone to his father and told him of his wish. The moramati had refused, had roared his deep suspicion of the missionaries who were destroying everything that Peter was as a Kikuyu. Next day Peter had gone to the missionary school instead of the village school. His father's rage had been huge; Peter would never forget the thrashing he got from his horny hands. At school Peter was taught to read and write English, recite the chronology of English kings, how to buy and sell in pounds and shillings. He was taught that one must not cheat, lie, steal. One must not kill—not for sacrifices, not for love or the lack of it. He was taught geography which had no place for the spirit of the river but only for its uses and its course. The white-frosted men who taught him were kind and patient and very distant. Peter did not understand them, and he was often sullen, curling up like a snail with a hopping bird around. He had the intelligence to know that the education he was getting was an attack on him as a Kikuyu, on the beliefs and mores of his tribe. He became lonely. Seeds of sadness were sown in his heart. His protest this time was less dramatic, but more personal. The missionaries condemned the *Wengeowayko* game between boys and girls. Peter played it as often as he could. He remembered the game vividly.

The thin rod covered with a skirt of feathers going round and round. Rod-like figures of the girls wrapped in striped cloth with the colors of a crowing cock going round and round. Feet thumping, beating the ground into a metal circle. Necks circled with bone necklaces, thick and round. The drums beating the air into round discs. The voices sending rings of song into the air. A hen suddenly in the center of the circle squawking, having found a way in through the moving fence of black legs. The circle closing in, and all the voices turned to laughing. The hen made to rise to the level of their waists, the drums sending overlapping discs into the air. The hen growing hysterical. Suddenly the circle breaking up, and the boys and girls running into the large hut.

The game would move on, as they sat and shared the food that each of them had brought. They would laugh and talk.

And then someone would yell *wengeowayko*, and they would all take up the shout and the noise would increase until they had paired off, one boy to a girl, and sat down and then laid down. They must not choose their favourite boy or girl, for that would be selfish. And they must play this game many times after they were no longer children and until they got married. On the straw mats they would make love, the boys quite bare and girls protected by leather aprons. They would not copulate. They would kiss and caress, play with beads, exchange riddles, decorate each other, and they would go to sleep lying close to each other. Peter played these games, and as he played he would hear the voice of his missionary teacher say, "Peter, these games are wrong, they are primitive customs, and the charms you wear will do nothing against the spirits that you believe live in the trees, you must learn to pray and love the Almighty." Peter would curl up against the sweat-soft body next to him, look sad and sullen, and be still as a shell. At the end of school he was still a non-Christian, he had rejected his teachers' counsel to embrace the religion of Christ. But he clung to the name by which they called him, discarding his tribal name given him by his father.

The voice of his father was serious one day.

"Father, I honour you, I respect you. But I cannot get married. I cannot obey you yet."

"You are my eldest son. You must take your first wife now. Women are like the land. They must be cultivated at the right season. Often must you sow the seed. The gods demand many children as sacrifices and you must sow often to build up a line of sons to follow you. You'll marry this dry season and prepare yourself to be moramati. For my hair is getting white and my teeth black."

"Father, I am going to Nairobi. I cannot get married. If I am to serve our people, I must go beyond the village and learn from the world outside. I must go."

"The towns are diseased, they are rotting like carcass of a dead elephant. You will become full of pimples and scars. Towns are full of evil, spirits of evil white men. You will learn nothing. You must stay and look after our lands and think of your village and your tribe."

His father did not thrash him this time. He sat with his hands resting on his thighs. His eyes were dim. He looked at Peter, and again Peter could feel the rage and fear. Peter could not meet his gaze and moved away slowly. Soon his mother was weeping loudly.

A few days later, Peter Kabaku left for Nairobi.

Peter had never seen so many white men before, so many white houses, so many walls and sharp fences. The city looked to him like a dead garden of white bones. He wandered through the city, his feet moving like fast drum beats. His head darted off in every direction. He was on a wide street, on either side large houses with walled-in gardens, and as he moved along, the morning sun pasted his loping shadow against the whitewashed walls. The sound of a horn broke the quietness of the street. Peter froze in his tracks. The fender of a green limousine nudged his dusty leg as it came to a stop. The uniformed black driver hurled a curse at him. A cigar with a glowing end was pointed at Peter from the back window as if it were a gun. Peter lurched back onto the kerb he had just stepped down from and the car moved out rapidly.

Peter now moved on more cautiously. Slower. Stopping at every kerb, looking around, often in the wrong direction, hesitating, and then darting on. The sun rose higher, and Peter's shadow was on the pavement behind him, the houses became smaller, closer together, the streets narrower. He was hungry. He sat on the side of a road, put down the bundle he had brought with him, and watched. He noticed that most of the cars were driven by Negroes, but they looked somehow very different from the men and the boys of his village. Some of the Negroes were riding bicycles, and many were walking, carrying baskets, wearing the oddest mixture of clothes. The Negro women too looked strange. Some of them wore flowered dresses to their knees, and were carrying huge scallops of fruit on their heads. Some wore straw hats, swinging their hips, shuffling in shoes that did not fit their feet.

Soon the houses changed into shop fronts. A shining red car behind a window with its door open so that you could see all the glitter of chrome inside the white cushioned seats. Peter

had never seen anything so beautiful. He stared and stared with his sweaty face close to the window. A man dressed in a white overall came striding across the room to the other side of the window, on which he tapped, opening and closing his mouth, and waving his arms in a way that Peter soon understood that he was being shooed away. Peter scurried away leaving a sweaty mark on the plate glass where he had rested his head. A long line of shops opened before him, on a wide street with newly painted fronts. Dresses, tinned food, cheeses, biscuits. Peter was fascinated, and moved along slowly, taking care not to stop too long or too near any of the windows. He even forgot he was thirsty. After a long while he came to a large shop with paintings in the window, and many books. "Stationers and Book Shop," he read. Excited like a little boy, he hitched the bundle under his arm and decided to go in. He walked up the entrance slowly, looking about him furtively. But everyone on the street seemed unconcerned and was going about his own business. A couple of white men passed him, quite unconsciously giving Peter as wide a berth as possible. Peter finally reached the entrance and put his feet on the coir matting. A hand roughly grabbed his arm and twisted it. "What you want here, nigger? Anything serious you want you go to the back of the shop. Now clear off double quick."

Peter got a glimpse of toppling shelves of books and more books, as he lurched, half fell, and then, recovering his balance, ran like an animal for about ten minutes without stopping. He found himself soon in a narrower street where the houses and shops were mixed up together and there was garbage lying in the gutter. Most of the shopkeepers were Indians, he noticed. Sitting like fat statuesque spiders in the midst of their wares. The streets were much fuller, of people, of noise, of disorder. There were a few women wearing saris, many Negroes and lots of children. Peter half ventured into a shop that seemed to have lots of bottles and sacks. An Indian was sitting cross-legged, and had a red mark on his forehead. Peter said very slowly in English, "I want to drink." The shopkeeper looked up, and then looked Peter from head to toe, very slowly, very deliberately, mulling and chewing steadily all the time. After he had gone

over Peter thoroughly, he slowly lowered his eyes and continued to empty some grain into a paper bag, shaking it often, and then adding a few more grains thoughtfully. "Something to drink," Peter now said loudly, and to his own surprise somewhat aggressively. The man chewed and folded his paper bag, then hardly looking at Peter he said in a high-pitched voice "Not here. Down, down."

Peter walked slowly now, his body already looking different, hunched up and contained within itself, as if he expected he did not know what would attack him from any side. His eyes trailed on the pavement before him and his feet were sad. He was full of jumbled thoughts and fears.

The street narrowed. On the side a pile of split tomatoes and rotting cabbage leaves. And near it squares drawn out with chalk in which some Negro children were jumping and laughing. On either side of the street stood wooden shanties, decrepid huts crowded together, patched with leaves and bits of rag. Women in flowered dresses with torn scarves tied round their heads were scouring pots on the doorsteps. In this part of the street only Negroes were to be seen.

Further down there was sound of glasses being washed and knocked together. An indeterminate voice was singing. Peter went past the shack and saw some wooden tables with a few men lounging about, glasses and bottles on the tables. After he had passed the shack he turned round and came back toward it and looked in again at the door which was covered with a kind of beaded curtain. He poked his head in, and said softly, "I want to drink." No one took notice of him with all the music and clanking that was going on. The men were wearing blue overalls, sweat shirts, colored pants, and one man leaning against the wall wore a white trilby with dark glasses underneath. Peter went in and went up to the bar. "Something to drink," he said. "What do you want?" the man who had been washing glasses asked. "Water," Peter replied uncertainly. A couple of men burst into swinging laughter and slapped their thighs. One man came up, snatched Peter's bundle and gave him a poke in the ribs. All the rest of the men started laughing, and three of them at a table who had been playing cards, stopped and laughed

loudly. "I want water." The man with a white trilby, who had not laughed as loudly as the rest, took his dark glasses off, winked at the washer of glasses. The washer of glasses ducked behind the bar and reappeared with a glass which he plonked in front of Peter. Peter took it and gulped it down quickly, wondering at the same time what kind of water it was that tasted so unlike any water he had drunk before. "More." White Trilby came toward Peter holding another glass. Peter looked around him and found they were all watching him. He emptied the glass. Someone lit a cigarette. Peter was swaying on his feet, and his head felt as if someone had hit him. There seemed to be so much smoke in the room that he could see nothing clearly. He wanted to get away. He tried to lurch. All the faces glowed, purple-black, whites of eyes, and white teeth, falling out to pink tongue music.

Peter woke to find it was very dark. He was on a street that was more desolate than the one which he last remembered being in. His whole body ached; he hardly knew where he was and what he was doing. He found that he was propped up against the wall of a shack, his shirt was torn, and the charm he wore round his neck was missing. He looked around for his bundle. It was missing too. It suddenly occurred to him that he was alone in a strange city, lost, with all his money and clothes gone, his head heavy, and his whole body aching. He got up slowly and dragged his feet along the pavement.

It was then that he collided with Old Flory. Or, more accurately, with a chair. Old Flory spoke with a voice that seemed to come from a large oven. "Yeh seems to ev lost somfin, but ah cain tell yeh that ah sec them thats drag yeh here about two hours ago en that yous bin lying her liak some dead sack for two hours." In the dim light of a derelict lamp post Peter saw Old Flory—an outsized black forearm, and a gaudily patterned dress that stretched over a huge belly on which lay a lazy hand and a bowl of shelled peas. He moved a step back and looked at the face that was poised with finality on the flowery bosom.

Old Flory was kind. She heard Peter's story, gave him a steaming mug of tea, then allowed him to stretch out in the

kitchen for the night, after feeding him with a greasy gravy with large chunks of bread. And she allowed him to stay the next day and the next, for a whole week, for her husband had died two years before, and her only son was a sailor.

On the eighth day Old Flory told Peter of some whites who wanted a houseboy. And thus Peter came to work for Mr. Ashby, assistant manager of a British firm.

It was Sunday and Peter was looking for a house named "paradise." He found it about noon, after walking for some two hours. It was not a big house, but looked huge to Peter. He stood by the gate, feeling clammy. On the verandah a white man in a tight sports shirt sprawled on a long cushioned cane chair. He was reading a newspaper. Peter opened the gate silently, and walked noiselessly up to the verandah. Above the white man's head fixed to the wall there was a wooden plaque on which the letters P A R A D I S E were carved. Peter formed the letters with his lips as he used to in school. He was startled when the white man suddenly spoke out: "Lost, Lost." The white man stopped abruptly as he saw Peter, and then barked, "What do you want here, creeping in like that, clear off you. . ." "Good morning, sir," said Peter softly but quite firmly. "I come to find Mrs. Ashby, sir, come for the job of houseboy, sir."

The white man looked him over silently, and then shouted, "Joseph! Joseph!" An old Negro with a bent back and sly eyes came running to the verandah carrying a bottle of beer on a tray. "Put that down, you idiot!" yelled the white man. "Ask this fellow his name, who sent him here and whether he has worked before. He wants to come in as houseboy." The old man asked Peter in Swahili to leave the place immediately as the master was angry and he did not want him. Peter spoke in a firm voice, slowly picking his words.

"My name is Peter, sir. I come from a village. I have lost my money and clothes. I need a job sir."

"So you know English?" said the white man, laughing sarcastically. "Been to school?"

"Yes, sir. Missionary school. In my village."

"Are you Christian?"

"No, sir."

"Are you afraid?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did Joseph tell you?"

"He said I should go away."

The white man laughed noisily and said "Bastard." He then turned to Joseph. "Show him the house. I need a house-boy myself. Go on, get out of here now, and put another six bottles on ice."

Joseph did not show Peter the house. He took Peter into a small room next to the pantry and put a long line of men's shoes and a longer line of women's shoes, and said, "Polish," and vanished. Peter started polishing the shoes. Joseph scurried in and out. There were regular shouts from the verandah for him, each shout becoming more vicious and more strident. In the middle of the afternoon Peter gathered that the master was drinking whiskey instead of beer, that the mistress would not come for lunch, and that the master had refused to eat. The shouts from the verandah subsided toward late afternoon, Joseph snored in his pantry, the cook went out taking with her the lunch meat the master had not eaten, and Peter still labored with the shoes of a woman he had already begun to fear and hate. Much later, Joseph and Peter were required to carry their master to his bedroom, undress him and put him to bed, and by his bed there was a bottle of spirits and a glass. At night a dazed and tired Peter was pushed into the bedroom by Joseph, with instructions to deposit a plate of sandwiches and a thermos of water. Peter found the bottle empty and the red eyes of the master staring at the ceiling. "What do you want, you filthy bastard?" asked Mr. Ashby. "I'm the new houseboy, sir, Peter, sir, and I brought your sandwiches, sir." Mr. Ashby mumbled something that Peter could not understand. The master tried to make a sandwich and his hand meet, but could not. Peter picked up one and put it in his hand. The master cursed. He ate while Peter watched terrified. The master was sick from the side of his bed. Peter ran around knowing not what to do, bumped into Joseph who sulked, pointed to a cloth, shook his head and watched while Peter cleaned it all up. Soon after that



the servants went to the outhouse to their bunks. The mistress, Peter learned from Joseph, would not return much before the dawn cock crew.

It was almost a week before Peter saw Mrs. Ashby. She came home very late, she got up late, and she had long telephone conversations locked up in her bedroom. Peter once heard her laugh through the door, like a long line of little cups being broken. He saw Scullia, the maid, washing and ironing numerous dresses. He saw the mistress go out dressed in sunshine and roses, and he never saw her coming in. One day, after he had been in the house for two weeks, he was asked by Scullia to see the mistress in her bedroom. Peter went in. Mrs. Ashby was sitting on her bed, her shoulders and a good part of her breasts bare. She was sipping a cup of tea. Peter stood near the door, waiting.

"What's your name?" the mistress asked after what appeared to Peter to be a very long wait.

"Peter, maam."

"Who sent you here?"

"Old Flory, maam."

"Where did you learn English?"

"At our village school, maam."

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen years, maam."

"Married?"

"No, maam."

"How's that? Didn't your father want to marry you?"

"Yes, maam."

"Then?"

"No, maam."

She laughed, and he saw her sparkling white teeth and her beautiful thin red lips.

"I wanted a houseboy," she mused. "But I believe your master needs you for himself."

Peter said nothing.

"There's already too many servants in this house, and I know what gossips they make."

Peter didn't know what would come next.

"I don't mind if you work for your master. He needs you. But you'll have to do a few things for me too. When I'm at home. I'm not at home very long."

Peter waited.

She looked him in the face, and Peter lowered his eyes. She smiled. She said, "Come near."

Peter went toward her a few steps, and stood, his head bent.

"I'll give you tips. Your master mustn't know what you are doing for me. Understand?"

"Yes, maam."

"Now, here's a letter you've to deliver. Nobody must know. The address is clear, you can read, can't you? And take this."

She gave Peter the letter and a coin. "Keep the money. Now go."

As Peter was about to leave, she added, "Be careful. You'll lose your job if anyone knows about the letter."

Peter soon learned from the cook everything about his master and his wife. She, Rose, was known to be the most beautiful woman in Nairobi. She sang at *The Lion, Rose, And* every evening, where Alec Ashby saw her and fell madly in love with her. He used to stay at the bar right to closing time, never taking his eyes off Rose as she moved from table to table, smiling and pouting and showing her legs. He sent her flowers, chocolates and little and big boxes all tied up in ribbons. Then one night Alec Ashby got into a fight, he was spitting and full of silent rage and he threw a drink at a small bald-headed man. There was a terrible uproar, and of course they were fighting over Rose. And Mr. Ashby almost lost his job because the man was a close friend of the manager of the firm where Mr. Ashby used to work. Mr. Ashby gave up going to the bar. In the meantime, he married Rose Kingsley. No one knew how, or why Rose married Alec Ashby. The management of *The Lion, Rose, And* were in a flap. They would lose all their trade without Rose, because *The Lion* on its own was not much of an attraction. But soon everyone calmed down because Rose sang just the same every evening, and went from table to table and smiled and showed her legs; she was even more alluring than before. The men sent her presents and ogled. The only differ-

ence was that Mr. Ashby no longer came to the bar. Mrs. Ashby sang and showed her legs at *The Lion, Rose, And*, and Alec Ashby tried to forget the scene with his bottles of beer and whiskey. Peter heard much more from Scullia who embellished everything she delivered to complete Peter's education, and Peter suddenly felt pity for his master. He was no longer sullen when faced with Alec Ashby's curses, his fits of temper, his red eyes that looked at Peter with contempt and mockery and his bruised expression that shut everything out. Peter started going out of his way to do things for Mr. Ashby. In his drunkenness he was open and vulnerable and Peter pitied him more, and his silent sympathy was a balm. Alec Ashby had no friends. It was Peter who would carry him while he shouted and cursed kicking at Mrs. Ashby's empty bedroom door. And it was Peter who would stand discreetly with his back turned while Alec Ashby broke down and cried and said, "Rosie, Rosie, Rosie."

Sometimes Peter would go and visit Old Flory, taking her small presents. He told her how he was trying to study, and read newspapers. He told her how serious was the war that had broken out and that they were thinking of conscripting the Negroes . . . but Peter could not predict the huge yawn into which Old Flory's face disappeared when he talked like this and all that she wanted to hear were stories about Mrs. Ashby and Scullia. But most of the time she talked, which made it easier for Peter.

One evening Alec Ashby came back from work and settled down on the verandah with his usual array of bottles and ice. Peter came up to him and asked, "Will you be wearing evening dress, sir, or your dark lounge suit? You have to dine at Mr. Russell's tonight."

"Oh, bloody fucking hell," said Alec Ashby, "I'm damned well not going."

Peter stood quietly while Alec Ashby took a large gulp from his glass and groaned.

"Alright, you fool, evening dress—and the black patent leather shoes. I suppose Mrs. Ashby isn't back, eh? Go on, go on, stop gaping at me. Damn nigger, damn Russell, damn the whole bloody lot."

Alec Ashby followed Peter into the bed room. His glass in his hand.

"Peter."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know what happens at these parties?"

Peter waited.

"Lots of things happen. Shall I tell what's going to happen tonight? Before eating, all the men will go outside and line up against Russell's garden wall, and we'll all undo our flies and altogether we'll say, "To Africa."

Alec Ashby laughed harshly.

"To Africa: To Africa! That's how we toast this bloody country. What do you think of that?"

Peter looked at him for an instant with frozen eyes and his limbs stiffened. He looked down again quickly burning with shame and anger.

"Ah ha, I've caught you out, Peter, you filthy nigger, you black monkey, what do you mean by..."

Peter interrupted him, and said slowly:

"Africa is my country."

Alec Ashby put his glass down and walked up to Peter.

"Oh, no, no bloody fear. Your country? Africa is ours! Africa belongs to the whites, you understand?"

They looked at each other. Peter's legs shook, his lips were parched, and he felt as if he was sick. But he stood with dignity, his eyes, silent, firm, locked with the blue, vaguely mocking, tentatively angry eyes of Alec Ashby. Peter won. Ashby looked lost, he did not seem to belong anywhere. They were both the same, looking at each other, neither master nor servant. Then Alec Ashby slapped Peter hard on either side of his face, he shouted at the top of his voice, and his voice broke. "Get away you dirty bastard..."

The world war had brought excitement to Kenya. Soldiers were coming in from different countries, prices were going up and more Negroes were getting jobs. Peter felt restless and tense. He went about doing his job, using all his spare time to read, and saving every penny so that he could one day go to college. His affection for Alec Ashby grew. One day he was queuing

up at the back door of a laundry with some of Ashby's clothes. As he passed the small window at the back, having taken his receipt, a hand folded a piece of paper in his, and whispered that he should read it later. Peter hurried home, wondering what the paper was about, and he read it in the privacy of his bunk in the servants' quarters. He did not fully understand what it said, but he got the message. There would be a meeting eight miles from Nairobi, in a Kikuyu village. He should come three nights after getting the note, at midnight. It ended with the words: "If you want to awaken Kenya, first wake up yourself. Come in the darkness of the night to look for the early morning ray of Light."

Peter arrived late. He found about forty men, most of them Kikuyus, sitting in a courtyard of one of the huts. A man who was perched on a box was speaking in a monotone. Peter, sweating from his long walk, sat down on the edge of the crowd, clasping his fast-beating heart. He had left Ashby drunk in bed and hoped the other servants would not notice his absence. He tried to listen to what the man was saying.

"Our most fertile land has been taken away from us. Our days of trouble and misfortune were known to our forefathers. Lord Mogai was our greatest benefactor. He could see the past, present and future of everything and everybody. One day he became sick and lost consciousness. He was carried to the top of Mount Kenya by our elders, and there they revived him in the fresh air. And he said, 'Kikuyu, you are in grave danger. From out of the seas white men will come to your land. They will bring iron snakes and have sticks that pour fire from afar. The iron snakes will embrace your lands in a python's hold, they will burn your huts and everything with their fire sticks if you try to stop them.' The elders asked Lord Mogai fearfully, 'What shall we do?'

"Mogai said, 'Don't resist them. Your arrows and spears are no match for their fire sticks. Be steadfast, and in the end good will come out of it.'"

The man paused and everyone waited in silence. The dark bodies could hardly be seen. Only their white clothes glowed dimly in the starlight. The man went on:

"Not so long ago, Lord Mogai's prophecy came true. Fifty years ago, the white men landed in our country. They brought shiploads of railway lines, pieces of iron snakes, which they laid across the land by joining them. They had guns. And the line spread through Kikuyu land, through the Luo land, through the lands of other tribes, from Mombasa across to Lake Victoria. The iron demon ran on these lines and covered the huge distance in two nights. The Kikuyu took them to be wanderers. We gave them food and allowed them to camp on our lands. They built fortresses. And we no longer owned our own lands. They took all our fertile land. They brought labor from India to build their railways. And in no time the black African became the wretched on his own earth, hated, despised, rejected by the whites and by the browns. We became savages and pagans. And some of us they took away and made into slaves. This is the story of our downfall."

The leaves of the fig tree moved, and the night insects were grinding away as, Peter thought, they must have done in Lord Mogai's time. Peter was deeply moved. He could hear his heartbeats, and he believed the heartbeats of every other man present at the meeting. This, he told himself in excitement, was the heartbeat of Kenya, of Africa.

"This is the story over the whole of Africa. The white men in their colonies will allow us to live only as slaves. The country is ours, the future is ours, not theirs. The land is ours. We are many. They are few. But they have all the power. We must learn how to resist and finally defeat their power. We need to build our strength, sink our differences, speak and act like one. We must be ready to give up everything to get back our lands. Our leader, Jomo Kenyatta, has asked us to organize to fight. We must organize..."

There was a huge silence. There were only the darkness, and dark night and its noises. Everybody was rooted.

Then a soft voice asked a question. Others followed. Peter noticed that all the questions came from Kikuyus. The few Luos who were present were silent. They were sitting together, on the right side, and now they were whispering among themselves. The

meeting broke up. Peter got up to go. A man pulled him by the sleeve and asked him to come inside the hut.

The speaker was sitting in a low chair. He had a wild growth of a full beard and deep-set eyes that were burning even when he did not speak. He looked intense in his silence. A girl was sitting near him, a Kikuyu girl, leaning on a table and writing busily in a notebook. She was young and looked very earnest. The front of her head was shaved, and the rest of her hair fell in many neat tight plaits. Her shoulders were bare and her breasts tightly wound by colored cloth. Heavy ornaments hung from her ears. Her body was strong and lithe.

"Name?" Her voice was clear and mellow.

"Peter Kabaku."

She looked to his face and then to the man with a full beard.

"I'm not a Kikuyu," Peter said a trifle rudely.

The girl smiled.

The man with a full beard smiled too. "This is not the business of the Kikuyus alone. This business of freedom and land. Of liberation of Kenya and of Africa. We want all the Luos to join the movement. If we are united, the British will yield. As long as we are divided, we are slaves."

Peter liked what the man said and the way he said it. The girl smiled and looked at him.

"Will you join us?" she asked.

"Yes. But I know nothing. I am poor."

"You have been to school," said the man with a full beard.

"We need you. If you come, other Luos will come too."

Peter did not understand the logic. He watched the girl write down his name.

"Will you pay us a donation?"

Peter took out a little money from his pocket. The girl took the money. Her eyes were gentle and shy. Peter said, "Thaai." She echoed. Peter left the hut and started back to Nairobi. He was full of a new excitement. He felt light and confused. Disturbed and at the same time full of a certainty. He felt that he belonged. This was his path. Those were his people. And many others. The land was his, and beyond it lay Africa, also his. This was the beginning of his journey. He

was a traveller. One of the first. He did not know where the path would end. Nor the shape of it. He did not know how far he could travel. But this was his path. Once again his feet moved like fast drum beats. He thought of the games he had played in his village. The hen that had got caught in the circle of the dance. His heart pumped, and his blood flowed and his feet moved with the sound of drum beats. And mixed up in all this was the girl he had seen and spoken to, serious and appealing. She did not intrude into his other thoughts, she did not distract. She seemed so much part of it all.

Peter went to many meetings after that. To the same village, to other villages and to places in Nairobi itself. Some of these meetings drew a large number of people. Peter read furiously, grappling hard with language and facts he did not clearly understand. He wrote circulars, notices. He spoke at small meetings. He hardly had time to go and see Old Flory. But he did go once or twice, and wanted to go more often. For Old Flory liked to hear, and Peter to talk about Wachira.

Old Flory was also eager to know every bit of news of the Ashby family. Peter did not tell her what he had known for several weeks. Mr. Ashby had decided suddenly to volunteer and was going off to the war.

Peter was clearing the remains of a meal when Mr. Ashby casually told his wife that he had got a commission, and that he was going very soon. Mrs. Ashby got up, more beautiful than ever, and came slowly toward him, smiling sweetly in her eyes. "You are a true patriot," she said. She kissed him softly, murmuring, "I'll wait for you." She moved away slowly. Mr. Ashby strode into his room.

"Peter," he yelled a few moments later. "Peter."

"Peter," he called a month or so afterwards, "Peter, you know I'm shoving off today. I've written out a thing for you, you know, one of those certificates, in case you want another job. And I've left some clothes for you. There. Don't expect you'll want to stay on here. Wish you could come with me."

Peter did not know what happened, but he found himself crying.



Alec Ashby was suddenly screwed tight as a spring. Nobody had cried for him before.

"I wasn't joking, Peter," he said after a pause. "I know something about you. If you want to get us out, you'll probably have to fight us out. You should learn how to fight. Perhaps you should volunteer too. You'll be able to see the world, hold and fire a gun, and they will give you plenty of newspapers to read."

Alec Ashby gave his crooked smile, thumped Peter on the back, and went quickly out of the room.

That was the last time that Peter saw Alec Ashby. He was killed in the war. A year later, when Peter was himself in Libya, a private in the Kenyan regiment of the East Africa Corps, he got a letter from Ashby. Informing him that there would be a little money in Ashby's bank for Peter if he ever wanted to educate himself in England. And telling him that he, Alec Ashby, would die "one of these days, very soon"—"it's one of the beauties of war, you know, Peter, that you really can get killed if you want to."

## ***NINE***

A long line of Negroes stood lined up in front of the recruitment office. An officer came to examine them, punched them in the chest, some in the stomach, sized them up. Twenty-two of them were chosen that day, and Peter Kabaku was one of them. He had wondered and argued long hours about this. Would he be fighting a white man's war? Or was he learning how to fight them with their own weapons? Kenya was becoming militarily more important as the situation in the Middle East deteriorated. More Negroes were earning more money than they had done ever before. This was not the situation in which to organize a land revolution. Attendance at the secret midnight meetings had been thinning, and the leaders of the movement were worried. Some of them had come to believe that Africans should make use of the opportunity offered by the war to train themselves in the use of modern weapons. The Negroes in Kenya might very well have to fight the British with arms; they would need military leadership. So when Peter raised the question of his joining up, he was supported by some, and opposed by almost none.

Something happened soon after Peter's visit to the recruitment office to steel his mind on the use of weapons. He learned bitterly that he was already too late to fight, and he had now no more time to waste.

A band of soldiers wandered one night into Wachira's village in search of fun and games. They dragged women out of their huts, and were attacked by the villagers in a body. The villagers used whatever weapons they could lay their hands on. The soldiers replied with their pistols. Wachira's father and brother were killed. So were two others. Ten of the village girls were raped. Wachira was one of them.

When Peter got to the village after running much of the eight miles to it, he found Wachira lying on a wooden plank, her eyes open and blank, mute. Her brothers and sisters were moving about foolishly. Her mother refused to look at her and was wailing hideously in another hut. Peter sat by Wachira, a vigil he kept the whole of that night. Wachira stared with eyes of stone. She could not speak. Later, in the morning, he found her eyes were shut and that she slept. He left her, went to speak to her mother, and found that she could not understand a word of what he said. He decided next day to take Wachira to Nairobi; her mother was out of her mind and could only shake her head and wail. When he asked Wachira whether she could come, she nodded silently. He took her to Old Flory, and came to see her every day. In a week Wachira was well enough. Well enough to move about, help Old Flory with her cooking, and to get married to Peter.

Peter took his bride to his village. Headquarters in Nairobi agreed to defer his call up by a month, when he had explained about his marriage. Old Moyagai Kabaku was delighted with Wachira. He chewed his bamboo pipe, blew clouds of smoke before his already cloudy eyes, and looked Wachira up and down. She was good, she would produce much harvest. Peter avoided his father. He was already a man of another world, and there was nothing much the two could talk about. Peter was reluctant to answer too many questions about Wachira, or about himself, and old Moyagai found his son to be a stranger. Why was he and his newly-wed wife so sad and serious? Wound up and waiting? They hardly laughed. Yet they seemed happy, and intensely aware of each other. They talked much more than all the young couples the old man knew did.

Wachira spent a long time curled up on Peter's chest.

"You will start a school here in the village, you will teach them what you know. I, too, shall be learning when I go to the war."

"I dread your going, Peter."

"You know that I am a traveler. I must go along this path. Our life is not for ourselves alone. I shall come back, I shall not die."

"I think, Peter, that I am perhaps with child."

Peter hid his face between her wide warm breasts. He did not want his wife to know what he suspected. But she knew. And she trembled.

"I am sure it will be your child." She paused. And then added, "If it is not yours, I will kill it with my own hands."

"No, no," Peter put his hand on her mouth.

"But I know it will be your child," she said, a glitter of smile in her eyes. "When you come back on leave, you will see your own child."

"You are my kingdom, you are my queen. I shall come back to the warmth of your lovely breasts."

"You are my peace, beautiful one. You are my whole world."

Peter had been to many parts of the world. It was almost two years before he came back to his village on leave. The clouds hang low, thick and entwined, like monsters wrestling. It was raining, the thatches of the huts were soaked to a dark mildew brown and there was sticky mud everywhere. Peter remembered the smell of burning wood and the smell of porridge coming from the huts. He remembered how his heavy boots slipped in the mud, and how his steps quickened and then slowed down to a shyness as he came near his hut. He wiped the rain from his face, and felt hot and dirty in his uniform.

Wachira was feeding a small curly-fisted child. It was black, and clung to Wachira's breast like a black cloud clutching to the dark sky in the night. Wachira's breasts were large and heavy, and she seemed fatter and fuller than when he had last seen her. She pulled her nipple from the child's mouth and came toward Peter slowly. Her eyes fixed on his. Peter took his cap off. His hair was short. He looked thin and hard. He smelted tobacco.

They smiled. They did not speak.

Wachira went to pick up the child which was screaming in frustration. She brought the child to him.

"He is yours." These were the first words she spoke.

"Look at him. He resembles you too much."

Peter took the child in his arms. It cried. Peter did not recognize his son. He thought the child had Wachira's eyes, and

he could not see anything of himself in it. He returned the child to Wachira, who gave it her breast. Peter placed his hand on the other breast of his wife.

"We call him Nduma," she says, suppressing the spasm in her body. "He is very naughty, and misses his father."

"Ah, that is a strange name, Wachira. It means darkness. I would call him Ngatha, the liberal man."

The child fell asleep. They made love. Wachira was wild. Peter was cruel and exacting. As she lay under him, crying silently in joy and pain, her eyes scanned his face, and her lips quivered. He had known other women, she thought, perhaps white women too.

As Peter ate later, he told them all about his travels in Egypt, Libya and Iraq, and about the war. He seemed much changed. His outline had hardened. He answered questions slowly, after some thinking. His father was now a very old man, he spoke little, and constantly nodded his head. Lying next to Wachira at night, Peter felt the layers of rocklike hardness in himself. When he took her again, she wasn't wild any more. She was watching. They talked. In fragments. Peter said he must go back soon, he had to be in Nairobi for some time, for he must meet some people. She told him that the school was going well. Did she like to be in the village? he asked. She did not answer, and he took her silence to mean she did. She asked him shyly about all the other women he had met while he was in the army, and particularly about the white women, and he was briefly playful. He fell asleep. She lay awake, fearing, thinking, wondering. Next morning, Peter's father again told him, his head constantly nodding, that he would arrange now for his second wife, and Peter was firm, and said, "No more wife for me, father." The old man shook his head, stared vacantly, and said nothing. Peter said, "I am a traveller. I have a long way to go, father." The old man did not hear him and went on shaking his head.

Wachira half understood. She had grown used to his absence. But this time she did not know whether she could repair the dam which held the floods of her mysterious body in check. She would have to work twice as hard as before. She

said to Peter again and again that he must come back soon. Every time she said this she looked intently into his eyes, trying to read the inner meaning of his playful replies. She did not weep as much this time as the last time when he left.

Peter was demobbed, due to a spine injury, a year before the war ended. Given the choice of going to England or returning to Nairobi, Peter chose England, partly because he wanted to meet Jomo Kenyatta, and partly because he wanted to get the money Alec Ashby had left him. Kenyatta was attached to London University and was trying to prepare the ground for African independence. At his place Peter met other Africans—from the Gold Coast, from Nigeria, Uganda, Nyasaland, Ethiopia and South Africa. He listened as they talked about Africa's liberation, sipping their beer and whiskey. They disagreed, argued, quarreled, and Peter listened and watched in dumb excitement. He was still shy in the presence of people he thought were his superior in education and knowledge. Jomo Kenyatta advised Peter to return to Nairobi and to educate himself. Peter stalled. He had begun to like London. He made a couple of friends, and they started having a little fun. One evening they were walking the streets of Soho, looking for white prostitutes. A girl was waiting near a shopfront. Peter walked up to her, she looked him up and down, and said nothing. Peter became bolder. The girl slapped him across the face. "Get away, you nigger," she said. Peter took the next plane to Nairobi.

It was not easy to get back to normal life, even though Wachira was with him, and she bore him a second child, a daughter. Peter read books as well as newspapers, worked for a political organization, got a job on a Swahili newspaper, thought a great deal, and became sadder and sadder with every passing year. He looked older than his age, grew quieter, and was tormented by questions for which neither he nor his co-workers had any reliable answers. When, in the early fifties, Peter's political organization started a peaceful agitation to assert African right to the lands reserved for the Europeans, he was surprised by the hostility with which the white men reacted to what every African regarded to be a most legitimate demand. Peter was

one of the first to sense that Kenya was poised on the edge of a precipice, and that the struggle that was coming would be violent and brutal.

Peter was not opposed to violence. He felt an intense hatred toward the white man and all that he stood for, and he was not averse to killing the white man and getting killed. The questions that tormented him were of a different dimension. He was bothered by the deep-rooted hostility between the tribes in Kenya, the Kikuyu and the Luo, and between the many tribes of the other African countries, and he wondered if the violence the African would use against the white man he would also use to fight against his rival tribe. Peter was bothered by all kinds of nameless fears and doubts. He was afraid to speak his fears and doubts to his closest friends, even to Wachira. Sometime he would venture out, cautiously watching Wachira's face and weighing the sound and meaning of the words that came out from his mind.

"Which is more difficult? To win freedom or to build a free nation?"

"Are you asking me?" Wachira would reply with a smile on her lips.

"I ask myself."

"And?"

"I don't know the answer."

And again:

"How do you think we will behave once Kenya is free?"

"Just as we behave now, I suppose."

"It would make no difference, then?"

"It should."

"Shall we behave like the white man?"

"Like the white man? I don't understand."

"The white man orders the police to fire on the negroes. It's happening almost daily in some place or the other in Kenya today. Shall we do the same?"

"I suppose we may."

"Then, what's the difference?"

"What difference are you talking about?" Wachira spoke with some impatience.

"Nothing. I'm getting stupid, that's all."

When the Mau Mau revolt broke out, Peter realized the contradictions that he had allowed to grow inside him. As a leader of his community, he was with the rebellion, but deep within his own heart, he found no great response to what was happening around him. Intellectually he had been drawn somewhat to Gandhi; he had read about Gandhi without understanding either the man or his technique very clearly. But it had seemed to him that Gandhi perhaps knew what most other freedom-fighters did not: the technique of winning without violence. India attracted as well as repelled him. India fell away from the British Empire, the unbelievable had happened. Then the Hindus and Muslims massacred each other—was this a consequence of peaceful independence? A bullet killed Gandhi. Was violence inevitable? And hate?

His political friends wanted to cultivate India's support for the Kenyan independence struggle. The British were grossly distorting the events in Kenya, their propaganda machine was depicting the Mau Mau as a body of blood-thirsty cannibals. They wanted to send someone to India to dispel the effects of British propaganda. And their choice fell upon Peter Kabaku, an admirer of Gandhi. Peter was relieved to get a chance to get out of Kenya. He took his mission most seriously, and regarded himself as Africa's first unofficial ambassador to India. Of course he could not take Wachira with him. It had to be worked out rather cleverly. The British Government in Kenya would not let him travel to India. So Peter went to London. Jomo Kenyatta who was still in London worked it out with Krishna Menon, personal friend of Nehru, and Indian high commissioner in London. From London Peter Kabaku sailed for India.

Before leaving Nairobi Peter had gone to see Mrs. Ashby. She did not recognize him. She was living in a smaller house, Scullia was still with her. She looked ravaged and faded. She sent Peter out to the kitchen, swivelling her unfocussed blue eyes. Scullia told Peter that they would not keep Rose on at *The Lion, Rose And* because the poor thing had started drinking, and just could not keep off it, that the poor master who died in the war,



and that there were men who came and went and that they made her mistress cry.

Peter left the house that smelted of stale powders and spirits. He was sad. For he remembered Alec Ashby, and the letter from him leaving him some money. Peter was pleased with himself for not spending that money. During his days in London, he had decided to use the gift from Alec Ashby for a building for the school Wachira had started in his village. He would do that some day. Walking back to his own dwelling, he remembered Old Flory and his first days in Nairobi. That was the beginning of my journey, Peter mused, I am still wandering. Old Flory helped me to begin, and now she's gone. There is a stone in my chest for her how, a stone in my chest for Mr. Ashby, there are many stones in my chest, and I feel tired at times . . .

## TEN

Peter Kabaku had been called back to Delhi from the little village he liked so much. An incident had occurred. He was required as the President of the African Students' Union to intervene.

He was staying in Constitution House, which was a pretentious hostel, but more luxurious than the other one he had stayed in before.

It had larger rooms, higher ceilings, more furniture, private bathrooms, and was therefore for more important people. Or for less important people connected with more important people. Peter Kabaku, of course, got a room on his own right. He was becoming a well-known figure, his photograph had come in the papers, Mr. Peter Kabaku, of Kenya, working in a village, and being patted on the shoulder by the Minister for Community Projects.

Peter was sitting on an armchair with a look of despondency on his face. A carafe of water, streaky outside and cloudy with suspensions inside, stood on his bedside table. There was an electric light with a naked bulb, a fan with a frenzied whine added to its whirr; and modern sanitation. Peter was lost in melancholy thoughts. Slouching unhappily in his chair, he wished Miss Dutt were here to support him in his task which he evidently weighed with some distaste. The thought of his only close friend in India made him sadder.

At this time, there was a loud knock on his door. Peter shouted, "Come in," and tried quickly to remove the mournful expression on his face. He had to look like a maramati. "Come in," he shouted again. The dirty curtain hanging in front of the door was timidly pushed aside, and four men appeared, grinning sheepishly.

Peter looked at them gravely. He did not get up. The four young men sat down on the bed and on the two chairs in the room. None spoke for a while. Peter puffed at his cigarette. Then he spoke.

"Aah, *Wayenga*, young brothers, what have you done? You have surely crossed your limits. You have soiled and darkened the name of your beloved countries in the eyes of these people. We are here as representatives of our countries. We are ambassadors. We have a great load to carry. They see the whole of Africa through us."

The four youths sat with their heads bent. Peter paused, looked at each of them, suddenly felt very tired, and went on:

"All the people staying in your hostel say they are too scandalized and frightened to stay on there. The management of the hostel say they are too scandalized and frightened to let you stay there. What am I to do? There is housing shortage in Delhi, what will they do with a huge empty building? They say you dragged the *ayah* into your rooms, the woman says you all pounced upon her, they say she is in great shock, that she is ruined. *Wayenga*, this has become a public scandal. What am I to do? I only hope the Prime Minister does not hear of this? If he does, if he sends for me, what shall I tell him?"

Peter stopped. There was again a silence. Then, one of the four men spoke, "It's not true, what you have said now. We did not drag the woman into our room. She came. We did not have even a chance to remove her clothing. She started wailing. It was a frame-up. They do not want us in that hostel. Because we are black people from Africa. Because we are Negroes."

The three others spoke all at once in his support.

Peter felt very tired. Sleepy.

"You are still not blameless. Even if your version is true, you fell in the woman's trap. You would have taken her to bed, all of you, if she did not wail. It's all too sad."

He wanted to ask the men to leave and then to fall asleep on the bed.

"You must understand that I feel for your heartburn. I am your leader. I know how you feel living here. You are not

allowed into respectable houses. You have no social standing. You are lonely. But you must remember that your personal freedom to act in the way you like is denied because of national responsibility. You are part—an undivisible part—of a glorious and unspoken heritage. You are here to promote understanding between nations. Whatever Indians may deny you, they are keen on Afro-Asian solidarity. So are we, all of us. Africans and Asians are one. You must control your carnal desires. We are here to build bridges, to learn. You and I have a mission, *Wayenga*."

Peter Kabaku finished. There was nothing more to be said or done. He waited the young men to take their leave. And he was surprised, then offended, when they did not get up.

"Don't worry. I have taken care of everything. Go back to your hotel. And do not try to rape any more woman."

They still did not rise.

"Is there anything you wish to say?"

The youth who spoke before, spoke again.

"Yes."

"Speak, then. My time is short. I have much work to do."

"I want to go back to Africa."

"Africa is a continent."

"To the Gold Coast or even to Kenya."

"What about your studies?"

"Our... my place is in Africa. Not here. I would rather get killed in Kenya than live in India."

"What's happened to you, Julius? You never talked like this before? And you are so good in your studies."

"That's how I feel. That's how most of us feel."

"You are excited. I understand. You are bitter. You'll get over it. Go now, and don't take this incident too much to heart. It's a passing breeze. It'll blow away. I'll see to that."

The young man from the Gold Coast got up. He was followed by the three others. They turned toward the door. Then the young man from the Gold Coast turned back, and said, "We're not the same. We are different. Africa is different. You're wrong. We have nothing in common with them. We must go

our own way. Stand on our own feet. If you don't see this, you are not our leader."

They rushed out of the room.

Peter sat in his chair for a long time. He was first angry with Julius whom he did not understand. Perhaps Julius was a communist. He hated too much. But the anger soon faded, and waves of sadness invaded all the crevices of his mind. He felt heavy and aged. He thought of his village, of the school where he had gone defying his father, of the missionary teachers who taught him, of the girls and boys with whom he played games. He thought of Nairobi, of Old Flory, and of Alec Ashby and his wife Rosie. And then his mind settled on Wachira, he felt her warm flesh, her soft breasts and belly, her strong smooth thighs. He groaned. And then he fell asleep.

He awoke with a start. Someone was sitting on the end of his bed. He sat up very slowly, sweating, his heartbreak knocked inside his head like a gong. He slowly made his arm snake toward the carafe and grabbed it with one swift movement. He was about to throw it when he saw that the figure was looking at him gravely and its head was inclined in a sad little arc. His arm was still lifted and poised.

"Peter."

He could not clearly hear the voice, but the face which was indistinct in the dark seemed to open out into a cave and his name was blown out. The cave was sealed when two lips, treaded like tires, came together. Then he saw that the eyes were fixed and staring like the eyes of a statue. He noticed the figure was gross, the breasts sagging like bells, the upper arms as huge as Old Flory's. The figure stretched out its arms, the lips slowly opened, and a cry was blown out as if from a long distance. The cry came toward him, ululating, approached him like a snake and wound itself round his neck and entered his throat. He was choking, he recoiled, his whole body shaking with fear. The mass of flesh, looking soft and rotting, fell toward him.

"Wachira!" screamed Peter.

But only a hiss escaped his lips. He dropped the carafe. It broke on the floor. The noise seemed to be prisoned inside Peter's head, and kept reflecting off the walls of his cranium.

A pool of water darkened the tiled floor. Peter lay back panting. Slowly, slowly he opened his eyes. His eyelids were sore and burning. Inside his head there seemed to be a tangle of wires, knotted cables in turmoil. Wachira. There was no way of reaching her, no way of speaking to her. His vocal chords were cut. She had come to the edge of his bed and could not move toward him. She had come, and she was gone. More and more distant.

It was a bad dream. It was more, an evil omen. Carrying a sombre message for him, across the ocean, across the continents? Had something evil happened to Wachira? Peter felt his body going numb. Had something terrible overtaken Wachira, their children, his family, village, his country while he was vegetating in this distant, alien land which he understood less as he knew it more?

He tried to collect his scattered, shattered mind. He remembered the four young men who had come, and to whom he had spoken. He remembered. They had raped an Indian maid-servant. Or had they? It was a frame-up, they said. The people at the hostel where they lived didn't want them. They had framed the whole incident. Still, thought Peter, still they had been tempted by flesh; they had brought the woman to their room, and they would have layed her if she had not screamed.

They had left after listening to his solemn words. What did he tell them? What solemnity did they hear from him? Did I rebuke them? Was I too hard on them? They needed women, each of these African men, and was it wrong if they took the woman that came by? Was she a pretty woman? Some of the Indian maidservants and scavenger women were very pretty. Cross-breeds, perhaps. Was that woman pretty? Perhaps she was. young and pretty. Soft, round breasts, nipples as big as figs. Peter sensed a stir in his groin, and cursed himself. That man, what's his name? Julius. He should never have belittled Afro-Asian solidarity! Not, in any case, for the sake of a maidservant who refused to be raped. What did Julius say, anyway? Peter could not remember. He wasn't really listening to Julius. He was thinking. Of Afro-Asian solidarity, and of a woman. Pretty. Soft. Nipples as big as figs. Not Wachira, oh God, no!

Another woman, a form—it was again sitting at the end of his bed. Now. Peter tried to close his eyes, but could not—this form was light-brown, creamy, slender, taunting. Peter jumped up in anger. His fingers coiled. He wanted to strangle this woman, this form, to death, and rape the corpse.

In a way she was dead when she came to him one evening, unsought, seeking . . . what? Not Afro-Asian solidarity, not even Peter's rich manly African outpouring, but . . . Peter refused to remember. She was dead and naked; even in her clothes she looked naked. There was nothing left of her except for a garment when her body was quiescent. But until then, she was a tongue of blazing lava.

He had never known her name. "I am a woman. Call me anything you like. I have no name." He had been afraid to ask too often, to show more curiosity than she permitted. She came to him one evening to ask for aspirins. They had never been introduced. He had seen her flitting down the corridors of Constitution House. She looked naked in her clothes. He had stared, in spite of himself, and she had smiled, throwing toward him a glance that only an Indian woman could command. He had noticed that she had a room close to his own. That evening he was working on an article for an Indian newspaper. There was a soft knock, followed by another. He went to the door and opened it. She stood shyly at the door for a moment and then came in, giving the impression that she was going out. "I am sorry to disturb you," she said, eyeing him and the books that lay scattered on the table and the floor. "I have a splitting headache, and I wondered if you had some aspirins." She smiled faintly, pressing her delicate fingers to her head. Peter fumbled. He said he never used aspirins. She lingered. She had a fine porcelain skin, a mouth like artificial cherries, a low straight forehead with curls, and whorls of carefully arranged hair. Her eyes were languid, heavy-lidded and dark-ringed.

She stayed. Much longer than she should have. She was endlessly folding and unfolding her handkerchief, performing, Peter knew later, a conjuring trick. She talked listlessly, moving from one chair to the other and then to the bed end, and then to the first chair. She lulled him and then seduced him. She drew

him to a point where he had to seduce her. It was immaterial, Peter was sure later, who seduced whom. He took her because she was there to be taken. And for once in his lifetime Peter did not feel that his head was a separate attachment to his body. He felt monolithic. She was entirely different from all the women he had known. He hadn't known many, perhaps none at all, for they were all cheap ugly prostitutes—black, white, orange and yellow, or, rather, imitations of all these colours. The only woman he had really known was Wachira, and this one was entirely different. She was skilfull. She knew her business. She knew how and what to give, and how and what to withhold. Sometimes she would subside into non-existence, into a dummy covered in rich clothes, into a limpid state of vagueness that Peter could neither penetrate nor get rid of. Sometimes she would be burningly, devastatingly present and alive, sucking into the womb of her body the last ounce of Peter's manhood, and leaving him prostrate, empty, void of all sense and sensibility. Sometimes she would be absent for days, and Peter would be left in his emptiness. Then she would come every night for days. She rarely spoke. When she did, it was something banal, which made Peter wince, laugh, and feel good. Her banality seemed more real than the Afro-Asian solidarity that Peter was building brick by brick with his high-minded Indian friends. Naked and somehow dead, she did a strange thing to Peter: she made him naked too. She took off his mask. Matching her nakedness with his own, he was no longer a man with a mission, but just a man, or better still, an aroused animal. They made love like two animals, each blinded by its own demand, fired by a passion that tore down everything known as civilization. What a pity that the passion ebbed so quickly, the animal died, the man vanished, leaving the ruins of mask, mission and Peter Kabaku, disembled, shattered. Peter missed her when she did not show up for nights. He waited for her, holding his heart in the palm of his hand.

She had established her own style of coming. Three knocks on the door, and Peter leaped up from his chair or bed, knowing she had come. He opened the door. She came in, her dead face lit with a smile which Peter knew was a challenge. She took off her clothes as if they were someone else's, and folded them



up carefully, humming some kind of a tune. She stood before her in her nakedness, her small, firm round breasts rising and falling as she breathed, the figlike nipples throwing a wanton challenge to Peter the animal. Peter stared at her body, as his own stiffened and hardened. They hardly spoke. He took off his clothes slowly, piece by piece, keeping his eyes fixed on her breasts, her black, big, pointed nipples, her slender waist bound by a narrow gold belt, and her buttocks which were shaped like domes on top of Mughal tombs, and were intensely alive. Fully undressed, Peter stood before her, frozen. She looked at his manhood with unconcealed admiration. She was flattered by his fear of her, by the fire that she blazed in him. She always took the lead in making love. It was a game she knew how to play very well, and she played it with cool, calculated skill. Peter trembled and groaned as her delicate tricks took him by surprise, until he forgot everything but his animality, and they fought like two forests on fire. Peter burned and burned and then finally exploded. Each time she made him force his way inside her body, and he felt like a king planting his standard on the soil of a vanquished land. He roared as he went into her body, he roared as he ploughed her endless mystery, and he broke into a thousand molten bits when he exploded within her. Her body which was writhing and twisting with consummate skill all the time that Peter was ploughing deeply, went still when his explosion came, and she watched him with mocking eyes as he lay upon her in ruins. He fell asleep on her body. When he woke up, she was gone. But her nakedness stayed, challenging him, mocking him, and strangely making him feel at peace with himself.

She never recognized Peter if she met him in the corridor. He never knew what she did, who she was or where she came from.

One evening she came and she did not go and fold her clothes or stand naked before his staring, hungry, fearful eyes. She sat down in his armchair, and a faint hissing noise escaped from her lips. Then in a listless voice she said, "I am ruined. I am destroyed. I am going to commit suicide."

Peter was surprised. He thought that she was in some kind of trouble. The missionary in him stirred, and he went up to

her, and said: "What's wrong? Tell me. I'll help you. I am your friend. There's nothing to fear. I have many friends in Delhi. They are important people."

She looked at him with contempt, and her eyes were tearful. "You help me!" she said. "You have ruined me. I am pregnant."

She said this in a tone that sounded like the clang of two metals. And watching Peter's shocked, twisted face, she added, "I am facing a horrible death and all because of you."

"Are you sure?"

This was all Peter could say.

She was angry, and she lost control of her grammar.

"What do you mean by that question? Of course I am sure, naturally of course, you me ask this. Barbaric Negro man you are, cruel asking. Now me all blown up, and you want to run away. Death, only death."

Peter was completely shaken.

"But I always took precaution . . ." he protested feebly.

"Not always, no, no, I know, not always. Besides, your precaution did not work. These Indian rubber goods no good. And I forgot a number of times. Don't blame me. Who remembers always, every night?"

"But . . ."

"There's not but any more of any use. I can't marry you. My family will kill me if I marry a Negro."

"I can't marry you either. I am already married. I have two children."

"That shows how noble and good you are. Running a helpless innocent woman like this with your black ugly seed. I can only kill myself now. Tomorrow the police will find my body, and they will look for you. If you can manage, run away to-night. I come to tell you this."

Peter looked aghast. She had never spoken so many words together before. She looked tired with the effort. She is going to die tonight, and her lovely cheesy body will turn blue, then deathly white and cold as ice. They would take her to the morgue and rip her open, chin to belly with a long pointed knife. And her buttocks, would they leave her buttocks unhacked? And

what will they find in her belly . . . the clue would be too obvious for the police to miss.

"But I will have to leave a note telling everything." She said after a pause, recovering from her tiredness. "Otherwise the police will harass my family."

"Why should you die?" Peter spoke summoning his courage. "Isn't there any other way?"

"There is, of course, but I have no money."

"How much would you need?"

"Three thousand rupees very least."

"Three thousand what?" he shouted aghast.

It was almost all his savings, the slow accumulation of two years.

"I can arrange for a thousand", he said. "I am not one to ignore his responsibility. I have a mission, you know."

"I can go only to a quack with that money, and he will kill me. I would rather take my own life. It will be painless."

Peter tried to be firm.

"Will you come to a doctor with me?"

She was firmer.

"No. I will not go to a doctor with you. He will know you have made me pregnant. That will be dishonour added to destruction. You don't believe me. There is nothing I can do. I must die tonight. Run away if you want. But they will catch you."

She rose.

Peter was in panic.

"Don't go. I'll give you the money."

"When?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Can I trust you?"

"If I don't, you may die tomorrow night."

"All right. You must give me cash. No cheque."

"I understand."

"I will come tomorrow night then."

"Yes. And you will stay tonight. Take off your clothes."

He could hardly recognize his own voice as he spoke the last words. She stood still for a few long moments, sizing him up. And then she began to undress.

Next evening he was not surprised to see her. She came in. Peter did not look at her. He opened his portfolio, took out wads of bills, and said,

"Here's the money. Count."

She took the money and kept it in her bag.

Peter said, "Now get out you. And never not come again."

The aftermath had been terrible. Peter Kabaku was invaded, assaulted and overpowered by waves upon waves of remorse, guilt and self-censure. It wasn't so much that he had had an affair with an Indian woman or that he had been unfaithful to Wachira. In his soldierly days he had spent nights with prostitutes without feeling guilty, if also without feeling much relief or happiness. It was an insult to his manhood that continued to eat him like a million worms feeling on a carcass. And to his injury was added the salt of the animal in him licking the enormous pleasure it had found in the delicate soft body of the woman who, Peter was now convinced, was not only a whore but had thrown a bait and he, Peter, had so easily, so stupidly, fallen for it. "Sixty fucks for three thousand rupees," he told himself again and again, "that's too costly, Mr. Kabaku." The thought made him angry and bitter. Not only with himself, but with everything around him. What am I doing here, he asked again and again, and found no satisfying answer. He felt like a hero caught in hubris, and his faith in his mission was for the first time rudely shaken. He began to regard people around him with a nagging suspicion. He became acutely sensitive to the presence of Indian women. Mysteriously hidden behind the shelves of their saris, these women made him nervous, afraid of himself, uncertain of his ability to defend his own integrity. Not one of them would take him as a genuine friend, respect him as a man, give him her affection, not to speak of love. And the men? They were nice and polite and hideously patronizing. He had been able to make few friends in India, raise little money for Kenya. These people have never really fought the British, he told himself now. They admire the British, and they are quite happy to remain under British intellectual tutelage. To them Mau Mau is African barbarism; they believe everything the British say about Africans, and their sympathy for us is just

skin-deep. The bitterness in his heart made Peter Kabaku saddar and sadder. He had failed in his mission. I came here to make friends for Kenya and for Africa. How many friends have I made? "I can't be weak, I can't give up so easily," he murmured repeatedly, without much conviction.

He decided to give up living in Delhi. He made an appointment with Mr. Sukhdev Sarma, Secretary in the Ministry of Irrigation and Community Development. And at the appointed hour he presented himself one afternoon in the office of Mr. Sharma. The turbaned orderly regarded him scantily, did not salaam him, and, without standing up from his seat, pointed to the secretary who occupied and controlled the room leading to Mr. Sharma's. Peter did not have to wait long before he was called in. It was only forty-seven minutes.

Mr. Sharma was very nice, very courteous, very patronizing.

"I know you by your reputation, Mr. Kabaku. I have seen your picture in the papers. And I have read your article. In fact, my . . . er . . . our Minister knows you personally." "I have had the pleasure of meeting him," said Peter.

"You are the leader of the African students living in India, aren't you? That's a position of great responsibility. I am sure Africa cannot be far from independence, although I must say I can't approve of what has been going on in Kenya . . . that's your country, Mr. Kabaku, isn't it? But I know that you are a follower of Mahatma Gandhi. . ."

"Everything you read in the papers about the Mau Mau isn't true, Mr. Sharma," Peter protested mildly.

"I have no doubt you're right. The British are great liars when they choose to be. What mountains of lies they invented about the Mahatma, about our freedom struggle! Katherine Mayo! *Mother India*! Haven't you heard about *Mother India*?"

"I have read it."

"You have? Well, I don't know if people like you should read such books. They may prejudice your mind against India."

"It hasn't. Although I dare say it says a lot of truth about India too."

"Let's not argue about that. India is so vast, so diverse, so

so many worlds packed into one that you may pick up anything you like and proclaim that this is India."

"You could do that about Africa too."

Peter was beginning to like himself a bit.

"I concede, Mr. Kabaku," Sukhdev Sharma laughed heartily.

And he said immediately, "Are you writing a book on India?"

"A book? Oh, no! I have no such ambition."

"You mean you have better and more useful things to do." Mr. Sharma laughed again noisily.

"I couldn't write about India even if I wanted to."

"Why, Mr. Kabaku."

"For the simple reason that I do not know India. The more I see of India and of Indians the less I know, the less I understand."

Mr. Sharma laughed again.

"Don't blame yourself. Kipling didn't understand India Foster didn't. Churchill didn't. In fact, we ourselves . . . er . . . many of us, I mean, don't know India too well."

"I have noticed that."

"India is mysterious. Take my own case. I am what they call a civilian. Indian Civil Service. The old Steel Frame. Well, I have always been patriotic, had quite a few brushes with British officers during the British period, but I did try to serve them to the best of my ability which . . . er . . . is not inconsiderable, if I may indulge in a little self-praise. Now, men like me should have been put into prison after independence. I mean, if Panditji had decided to do that, nobody would have come to our defence, and he would have won a lot of public applause. But what did he do? He forgot and forgave. He knew we had only done our duty by the British and that we were ready to do our duty by the national government. And he knew we were indispensable if he were to set up an efficient administration. And now you see, we have been working harder for building a new India than we did to run British India for the Englishman. Could this have happened in any country but India?"

"Well, I don't know that. But I am afraid that now that

this has happened in India, it is going to happen in other countries too."

"One must learn from others, Mr. Kabaku. India has a great deal to give the world, I tell you. A great deal."

"I have never had any doubt about that, Mr. Sharma."

Mr. Sharma was suddenly thrown into a reminiscent mood.

"Mr. Kabaku, it's the biggest mystery, I tell you, this thing that you call independence. We have all read of the sleeping princess waking up to the touch of the prince's magic wand. I remember . . . er . . . most vividly do I remember . . . that great and glorious day . . . August 15, 1947. It was midnight. The central hall of Parliament was a wonderful spectacle of neon light and white Gandhi caps. At the stroke of 12, Panditji rose from his seat, and made his historic speech. 'When the whole world sleeps, India wakes up to new life. . . .' something like that. I was sitting in the corner reserved for senior officers, and I trembled. Nothing had apparently changed. . . we were all the same. . . yet something great and historic had happened, which touched all of us, in the depth of our beings, and I remember my eyes became tearful. I had never cried before in my life. . . er . . . not that I am a very hard man . . . and now my eyes were full of tears. It's a wonderful feeling, and it's wonderful to be able to serve your country. You will know this when Africa. . . er . . . Kenya becomes independent. You of course will be a minister. And you won't even remember us then."

"I doubt if I'll be a minister, Mr. Sharma. I have no particular appetite for that kind of office. But, believe me, free Kenya will be glad to have Mr. Sharma as India's first ambassador."

Mr. Sharma laughed loudly.

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Kabaku. India will be proud of the fact that men like you have found something worth learning in this country. I should be glad to do anything for Kenya I can."

"That's very kind of you. There's something you could do for a Kenyan."

"Anything that you want."

"Nothing very much. I would like to work in a community development area. In a village."

"Which village?"

"Any. Not very far from Delhi. Because I must keep in touch with the Association."

"A very good idea. An excellent idea. India lives in her villages. You know nothing about India by living in Delhi, Calcutta and Bombay."

"I know that."

"When we began our life under the British, you know, we had to spend years in the villages. As sub-divisional officers and district magistrates, we were constantly on tour. We knew the villages as the lines on our palm. But now? The young men we get for our administrative services hardly want to stay in the villages. They despise district life. They all want to be glorified clerks in the secretariat, rather than district magistrates. It's a great pity."

"I'm sure it is."

"You may wonder why we let them get away with their hatred for village life. In fact, this is one of the evils of politics. They have access to the ministers. In the old days we used to run an administration. Nowadays we run a political system. That's the difference."

Sukhdev Sharma signed. He looked sad.

"I understand your difficulty, Mr. Sharma. You see the good points of both. Perhaps the good points of the old days a little better."

"Oh, no, no." Sukhdev Sharma protested. "I love my country, and I am proud of its independence. In fact, to tell you as a friend, quite confidentially, many of the ministers are very clever men as far as that goes, but they just do not understand the problems of government. My own minister, a very fine man, a very shrewd politician, but he just does not understand irrigation...er...I mean modern irrigation...big hydroelectrical projects, dams and so on, you know. One can't blame them, they didn't have the education, and so they have to rely upon us."

"Sure they do."



"I don't wish to appear condescending. But that's going to be your problem. In Africa, I mean. You have a terrible shortage of technical, technological personnel. And therefore I think this idea of yours...er...that you would like to work in a community development area is very good. When you are a minister in Kenya, and if you are in charge of community development, you won't have to rely too much on your secretary... ha, ha."

Peter joined in the laughter.

"Do you want to be posted, Mr. Kabaku? Do you want an official position and a salary?"

"No, no. I want to be allowed to work as a visitor. I have a scholarship, and that's enough for me."

"Very good. That makes it even easier. We have a very good project area within fifty miles of Delhi. I am going to arrange for you to work there. Nice place, near a river. And you will meet an interesting person there. A woman."

Peter's nerves suddenly froze.

"I'm not interested in any woman, Mr. Sharma."

"Not that kind of a woman, Kabaku." Sharma laughed. "You will like to know her. She is...er...I mean was a revolutionary. A terrorist. She shot at a British Governor, and was jailed for life. There was a huge commotion about it all. Even the Mahatma who condemned her act could not accept the brutal sentence awarded on her. And Panditji who was then a young barrister...without much practice though—was a member of the committee to organize her legal defence. Quite a drama. We released her soon after freedom."

"Sounds interesting. What's she doing in the village?"

"Oh, a lot of things. Messing around, I suppose. She wants to work in the villages, and she has a lot of pull with some ministers, and there she is, like a political supervisor. Our development officers don't like her. She is constantly pregnant with ideas, and each is a great discovery to her. It makes things rather difficult at times."

"I see."

"But she is not entirely useless. She has a lot of sincerity, and she loves the villagers and they have some regard for her."

And she is utterly honest and upright, a little too much, I should say, of a moralist. And I should better warn you, rather ugly-looking."

Sukhdev Sharma laughed again. Peter remarked, "Not a very tempting image."

"You are a revolutionary. She is one too, or has been. You may like one another. Very well, I should be able to fix this up in a fortnight's time. You will hear from me. Meanwhile, get ready for a real adventure."

Peter said thank you very much, shook hands, and was ready to leave, when Sukhdev Sharma suddenly remembered something.

"Oh yes, Mr. Kabaku, there is something else I must discuss with you. Are you in a great hurry?"

Peter said he was not.

"It's this. For the last three years we have been hosting a foreigner for a week at our home. You see, people who come to visit India hardly get an opportunity to live with Indian families. They live in hotels, go about the historical places, and return, in most cases, with very wrong ideas and impressions of modern India. So we...er I mean some of us in New Delhi, decided that we should offer hospitality to one foreign visitor every year at our homes for a week."

"A very good idea."

"So we have had as our guest three foreigners already, and all the three were from the western world. This time Mrs. Sharma is very keen on entertaining a visitor from Asia or Africa, and I think it's a noble thought. Could you recommend a suitable African to us?"

"What do you mean by suitable?"

"Well educated, well mannered and so on. You know what I mean. We are not exactly riff-raff people, and we would appreciate a measure of polish."

"You wouldn't mind a student, would you?"

"I don't see why we should. A boy or a girl?"

"A very fine young man. Very talented. He is from Uganda. Has been brought up in a Christian mission. Writes very good poetry. In English."

"That sounds rather good."

"I personally believe Solomon Kuchiro is going to be one of Africa's foremost poets. Very creative chap. Somewhat emotional and restless, I must tell you, but all creative writers are like that. It should be good for him to live with a good Indian family. And you will have entertained one of the new poets of Africa."

Sukhdev Sharma gave the matter a quick thoughtful appraisal.

"I think it's a good idea. Thank you very much, Mr. Kabaku. I will talk it over with my wife, and I will get in touch with you later. Can this boy come this fall?"

"He lives at the international students' hostel. Should be able to come any time."

"There's another point. We have a young daughter. She goes to college."

"I am very glad to hear that."

"I mean, you know our social customs . . . I mean this young man. . ."

Peter looked Mr. Sharma straight in the face.

"Solomon is a very civilized young man, Mr. Sharma. And a very talented poet. I cannot say anything more than that."

## ***ELEVEN***

It was the fourth night of Solomon's stay. It was late and it was cold. He was deep in the armchair, his long legs stretched out, his feet numb in his battered suede shoes. His head thrown back, his hands hanging from either arm of the chair. His hands were muscular, with sensitive, rounded tips.

He was wearing a thick slate-colored pullover, and his body, lithe and lusty, lay stretched out, fully extended like a telescope. His hair sprouted from the top of the armchair like a burning bush. He was warm inside with all the whiskey he had drunk despite the disapproving look from Mrs. Sharma. There was a furrow between his brows, his eyes danced, and then languished, his pupil growing large and almost swallowing his iris. He looked dreamy. Then he clenched his fists and pummeled the side of his chair, made as if to get up and then sank into the chair again, his hands limp and hanging.

He was full-spread-ahead-happy. Every part of him was so alive that he felt at any moment a bit of him would detach itself and go off and lead an independent life of its own. He could feel the elasticity, the fly-overs of his muscles. He could hear his plasma swirling into eddies and making toneless electronic music. He could see the tips of flowers growing. He could see clusters of leaves composing music.

He was in love.

He could only think of the tennis-playing Queen of Jhansi. He was in love.

Solomon got up and walked out into the garden. It was a world of black and white. He walked round and round up and down past her bedroom windows, he prowled silently, he receded, he approached. In his preoccupation he did not notice that he had gone off the lawn and was crunching on the red gravel drive-

way. Even with his crepe soles, rolls of noise came in rushes and then died down.

This awoke Sulochana whose room also looked out into the front garden. She got up quietly and without putting the light on, and peered out of the window, drawing the curtains apart a few inches. She got quite a fright to see a long dark figure pacing up and down in front of the house. A cry husky with sleep escaped her. The energetic caged walker would run and then slow down into a somnolent drag, and, then with another burst, give a train-catching walk with arms pumping vigorously. The bushy wild hair was unmistakable. She wanted to wake Sukhdev and tell him that the dangerous African had gone mad and was doing an evil dance in front of Sheila's window.

She did not remember when she had been so upset and disturbed. She gently shook Sukhdev, who just grunted and turned his back to her. She thought of Cynthia, that awful woman, and how she had lost all means of communicating with her husband since then. In fact she was sure that they wrote long letters to each other, and sometimes he would grunt in his sleep and she was positive he was repeating Cynthia's name. Sulochana decided she would not wake him and would take care of the situation herself. She went back to her looking post. There he was, running about like a wild beast. She quietly went up to the door, opened it noiselessly, tiptoed to Sheila's room. The door was closed but not bolted. She pushed it open, careful not to make the slightest noise, walked slowly to the bed, and found Sheila sleeping with her mouth slightly open. She covered her body with the blanket. Sheila gave a soft grunt, half-opened her eyes, and murmured, "What, Mummy?"

"Nothing, darling," she whispered. "Go to sleep." She tiptoed back to her own room and went back to her looking post.

After a while she saw the figure gazing up at the stars. For a long time. Then it abruptly wheeled round on its toes and ran lightly into the guest house. Sulochana stood for some more time. It did not come out. She returned to her bed, and could not sleep for a long time. She was trying to think of some way to get rid of her guest tomorrow without being too rude or creating a scandal. Could she suddenly fall seriously ill,

and not be able to look after her guest? Or have a troupe of relations suddenly arrive and displace the Negro? She finally fell into an uneasy tormented sleep, after peeping through the window to make sure he had not come out again to do some more jugglery and witchcraft.

Meanwhile, Solomon Kuchiro was sitting in his armchair surrounded by bits of paper scrawled and scratched. He was chewing a pencil like a squirrel, smiling and weeping. In brief, he was writing a poem.

At breakfast next morning Sulochana looked dyspeptic, sallow, tired and tormented. Sukhdev was unusually grave and absent-minded. Solomon, too, was haggard, but wildly euphoric, and tried to hide it by being silent and well-behaved, and saying hardly anything. He spilled the milk on the table cloth instead of on his cornflakes, and the yolk of his fried egg dribbled down his chin. Sulochana watched this with unconcealed disgust. Sukhdev, unable to make conversation, offered the newspaper to his guest. Solomon refused it, saying, "No, thank you, I find these newspapers too noisy." Sukhdev regarded this to be a highly silly remark, not worthy of notice, and relapsed into silence.

At this point, they were all startled by the languid appearance of Sheila at the breakfast table. Sulochana first went pale, then red with anger. Sukhdev tried to be indifferent, but clearly failed, and soon fumed silently. Solomon's face became ashen, then suddenly glowed, and he stood up with a smile on his face. Sheila smiled back. She spoke to her mother.

"Is there anything for me to eat, Mummy?"

Sulochana said, "The cook was sending your breakfast to your room."

"I am tired of eating breakfast in my room, Mummy. Could I eat with all of you this morning?"

Her voice was sarcastic.

Sukhdev's face was hidden by the newspaper. Sulochana called for the cook and asked her to bring Sheila's breakfast to the table. Sheila ate quietly, without looking at anyone.

"Do you always eat your breakfast in your room, Miss Sharma?" Solomon asked. He felt it was his duty to make a conversation.

"Not always. Mostly."

"It's a beautiful morning."

Sheila looked up, and smiled.

"I wrote a poem last night."

Nobody said anything. Sheila was busy with her fried egg. "I walked around in the lawn. For how long I don't know. All of you, the whole house was asleep. It was a wonderful feeling. I thought I was the only man awake in the whole world. I and the stars and the pale, little moon. And then I went back to my room and wrote a poem."

Nobody said anything.

Sukhdev got up.

"I must get up now. Well, Sulochana, I'll be back for lunch around one o'clock, but I have a meeting in the afternoon, and should be late in coming home. Mr. Kuchiro, you will please go out by yourself this evening. I don't think we have any further programme for you."

"That's all right Mr. Sharma. I am very happy, and please don't bother about me."

Sulochana looked at Sukhdev helplessly, pleading, pleading. Sukhdev walked with brisk steps toward the bathroom.

Sheila finished her egg.

Sulochana did not want to leave the two at the breakfast table. She said:

"Isn't your exam next week, Sheila?"

"No, Mummy, the week after."

"When do you go to college?"

"I have a class at three-thirty. I believe I should start after lunch."

"Don't you think you should do some work now?"

"Yes, mother."

But she showed no sign of leaving.

The telephone rang. One of the servants took it. He came and said that the call was for Sulochana.

"Tell her I am busy, and will call back." She just couldn't leave them together.

"Mr. Solomon."

"Yes, Mrs. Sharma."

"Will you please go to your room now?"

"Now? Yes, certainly, Mrs. Sharma."

"The servant is doing the room. I don't trust him. He has stolen a few things in recent weeks. Not big things, but still. Please go right now, and stay in. I don't want to hear that any of your belongings are missing."

"I have nothing anyone would like steal." Solomon laughed.

"Now, please, don't joke. Please go at once. You must be in the room when he cleans it up."

After Solomon left, Sheila looked at her mother and exclaimed, "Why did you have to do this?"

"I had to send him away."

"But why?"

"Because I want to speak to you."

"I am listening."

"Why did you come out of your room? You have been asked not to appear before him, haven't you?"

"But, mother, I have already met him. Why have spent most of a day together?"

"Enough. You had no business to do that. And now you come out of your room and join the rest of us as if you are going to see him whenever you wish to."

"He is really a very nice man, mother. Quite well-behaved and very natural. Not like the Indian boys at all. And he is a very good poet."

Sheila knew nothing about poetry, and had an enormous distaste for all the poets she had to read, but she said the last words with some passion.

"Has he been reading his poetry for you?"

"Yes."

Sheila did not hide the fact that she was very much flattered.

"You acted very wrongly yesterday. You must not see him again."

Something happened to Sheila, and she was surprised to hear her own words.

"That's very unfair, mother. Unfair to him."

Sulochana raised her voice.



"It is not for you to judge if we are unfair to the Negro African.

"He is our guest. We must treat him as respectfully as we treated our previous foreign guests."

"Sheila! I'll not take this from you. You'll do what you are told to do. You will not come out when he is around. And you will not see him any more."

Sheila could hardly control her trembling knees. Her whole body was shaking. But she said, "I am sorry, mother, I won't be able to obey you."

Sulochana was stunned. She stood still a moment. Then she took two steps forward to stand face to face with her daughter.

"You won't?"

"I can't. You are asking me to do something very wrong."

Sulochana slapped Sheila across her face.

They stood there facing one another. And then Sheila rushed toward her room. Sulochana walked slowly to hers, sat on the end of her bed, and wept.

She stayed in bed the whole morning. Hemlata brought her hot tea and pressed her legs for her. Sulochana thought she would go to the temple where they had a fair every Tuesday and also visit the astrologer as soon as she felt a little better.

She made a great effort and got up for lunch when she heard Sukhdev's car park in the driveway. Solomon had sent word through one of the servants that he would not eat lunch, but would join them at dinner; he had some urgent work in the university. That was some relief. Sulochana, however, would have liked to be left alone. She looked puffy, pale and sorry for herself. Sukhdev, rolled up in his car, and with a preoccupied look which the affairs of state were stamping deeper and deeper on his face, noticed nothing. He frowned and switched on the radio. Ramesh came in with a friend. Both boys looked so similar that it was necessary for Sukhdev to remove his glasses, blink, and separate them as the friend greeted him politely. He recognized the greeting with the smallest of grins. They sat down to lunch with the lunch time news booming in the background.

Nobody made a conversation. Ramesh and his friend talked in a clandestine language, exchanging sly smiles and winks. Sukhdev was evidently preoccupied with problems and issues he had left unresolved in the office. He ate indifferently, trying to listen to the news. (... "in the open air the President said that human nature is always human even in its social aspects. He added that the commencement of this exhibition was a reflection of the spiritual aspect of our great motherland, and the whole world was aware of our moral and spiritual cast of mind, and that our nature would always, and has from time immemorial, striven for higher values.") "Sulochana," Sukhdev said, "you know this fried fish is a little too heavy for me for lunch" Ramesh took three bits of fish and ate them with his fingers. "Ramesh, *betta*, you have got fork and knife to eat with, haven't you?" "Please, I am trying to listen to the news." ("... in the presence of a rail house he was cheered, and all the members gave their full support. The Food Minister said in the Lok Sabha today that there is no shortage of food, and that they were baseless rumours. He urged the farmers of the country to produce more, the more we produce, the more we shall have to eat, he said, amidst cheers. He urged the people to learn to sacrifice, the more you sacrifice, he said, the more prosperous you will be and the country too. The Minister for Defence said the morale of our troops is high and we shall not allow anyone to encroach on an inch...") "Sulochana, I have asked the Khoslas for a drink this evening, and you know how they always stay for pot luck. I forgot to tell you this morning." "But, Sukhdev, with that Negro here...." ("In the interim period, the Minister was sure the traditional methods would be overhauled, and only seventy-nine point four-five of the basic ninety-nine point three zero percent would be utilizing cowdung for manuring their lands."). "You need not worry about him. And he should be leaving tomorrow, if I am am not seriously wrong in my arithmetic." "The day after. If he stays a whole week." ("... that is the end of the weather report. This is All India Radio. For your lunchtime enjoyment we now bring you a popular little number called 'I'm black and blue, baby, give me your sunshine smile, do.'") There was a long pause while

Sulochana sat absolutely still. She alone saw Sheila rush out of the gate on her bicycle. Sukhdev looked at his watch, got up briskly, half-remembered not having seen Sheila at the lunch table, was about to ask Sulochana something, but walked quickly through the hall into his office room. The female voice in the radio crooned. Sulochana sat still, looking at the gate.

## TWELVE

A tree stood between two discolored walls. The walls made a narrow gully just wide enough for a man to pass. The base of the walls was soaked with jets of betel-nut juice. Refuse was scattered all along the length of the gully. At one point an awning was propped against the wall. It was made of irregular shapes of cloth and was full of holes. Under it sat an old hag. She had a barricade of rusty tin boxes. In these boxes were packets of cigarettes, matches and piles of *pan*, the green leaf chewed with betelnut. She sold the cigarettes singly, one fag for five paise. She picked her nose, scratched her legs and spat. Two thin dogs covered with sores licked the wooden telegraph pole. A cow, sacred with slender legs and eyes of a lyrical goddess, chewed newspaper soaked with stale grease. A child, its eyes bunged up with mucus, hair matted with dust, sat near the heap of refuse while crows came and flapped round its ears. A scavenger woman came and pushed the child aside and rummaged about. The child cried. The woman stopped rummaging, came to the child, lifted it up, opened her blouse, and fed it on the nipples of her big breasts. She put the child down, buttoned her blouse, and talked to herself. She collected a wad of bits of paper and piled them neatly, tied them up in a bit of cloth, and moved on. The child bawled.

A man came into the gully. He was small-pocked and one-eyed. He was wearing a vest and a pair of dirty pyjamas. He squatted in front of the old hag's shop. He spat a few inches away from his haunches and rubbed his hands along his thighs and scratched his balls.

"Eh, old mother, give me three cigarettes and two annas worth of peanut and brown sugar."

"Your grandmother left you a bag of gold, has she? Given

up smoking bidis, have you? Cigarettes it is now, you are become a big sahib. Here, one, two, three."

"Some rich Mem has come to stay with the people. Gave me a rupee for my services, you old witch."

He got up, leaving the old woman counting and recounting the coins he gave her, and danced through the slime of the gully.

He went through a narrow wooden door in the wall, and climbed stairs which were in a worse state of decomposition than the base of the walls outside. He looked around him and hid the cigarettes under a brick on the side of the stairs. He put the handful of peanut brittle in his mouth. His tendons and jaw muscles showed clearly through an unshaven construction of skin and bone. His Adam's apple rose and tell strenuously. He wiped his mouth as he entered the dark little room lined with many layers of greasy smoke.

He squatted in a corner of the room, near an open drain above which was a tap. He blew his nose in the drain, took up a handful of coir, and set to work. He had a pile of metal pots beside him and a mound of ashes. He scoured the pots in a desultory way stopping often to attend to his personal toilet, relieving himself of itches, blockages of passages, and other irritations on the surface of his body. These were the minor pleasures breaking the tedium of work that never changed. The cigarettes would be the real thing.

A woman came in. Her unironed sari was worn high above her ankles and it looked slept in, which it was. The shoulder piece was thrown over her left shoulder carelessly, the drapery in front clumsily gathered into her waist. Her midriff, loose and stretched, hung in a roll under an ill-fitting blouse. She sat down with a sigh on a low wooden board. She grasped a bowl between her bare feet and started to chop ladies fingers into it. She cut the vegetables rapidly, hardly looking at what her hands were doing. She looked in the direction of the other squatting figure near the drain. He was now scouring with more energy but still did not let his personal needs go unheeded.

"Ram Lal, you lazy scoundrel, haven't you finished the pots yet? There is a lot to be done with an extra person in the house,

and no ordinary person at that, she is the daughter of one of the biggest officials and eats with ministers and rajas. So we must make two vegetables today, and I want you to go and get some ginger and some fried *dal*. Oh, there is that Shanti! Screaming again! Prabha! Prabha!"

She went on talking to herself and a tall thin delicate girl appeared in the doorway of the kitchen.

"Go and see what your sister is bawling about. Give her a slap if she is up to her tricks again. And see if the clothes in the other room are dry. Eh, Prabha, see if there is any change left in the bag in the blue trunk, we'll have to get some extra curds—I only pray to God this kerosene lasts out, with prices what they are, going up and up, we'll all be starving in the gully, and our father having all those difficulties with his head clerk, I don't know..."

Prabha had meanwhile gone into the other room, while her mother continued her monologue.

Prabha found that her sister had been bitten by an insect and was sitting on the floor holding a swelling arm. Another child was asleep on a mat on the floor. There was no furniture in the room apart from a blue trunk and a brown trunk made of cheap tin. There were hooks on the walls from which clothes of many sizes hung. Prabha picked Shanti up and straddled her across the side of her hip. She bent down, opened the trunk and took out a few coins from a bag that was hidden under folded cloth. Shanti was still whimpering. Prabha took her to the opposite wall which she got to in a few little steps and tried to distract her sister with the calender on the wall. A buxom film star with a singing mouth and the head of a holy man surrealistically couched in her belly. Shanti was not impressed or comforted.

"Here is twelve annas, Ma, there isn't any more in the bag. I think an ant has bitten Shanti on her arm."

"Rub some mud in it—and I want you to come and help me make the *chapatis* in a little while."

Prabha went out on the terrace. There were two string beds propped up against the parapet. In a corner some rusted pots with holes in them. A gunny bag stuffed with bits of wood, and

over it was thrown a chair with stray bits of cane dangling from the seat. Broken earthenware vessels were scattered about and a pale plant in a clay pot struggled with extremes of heat and cold. A third string bed with roughly hewn legs sat on all fours in a patch of sun. On it was a girl dressed in a flowered silk sari, elegantly pleated in front, the shoulder piece drawn over the bosom that emerged like finely shaped domes. She sat staring out into the gully below.

Prabha's reedy form was curved sideways with the weight of the child. She came and sat down on the bed next to her friend. Sheila could feel the stubby bits of rope sticking into her thighs through the silk of her clothes. The two girls sat. For one, the small terrace, the gully, the tenements around were part of an unquestioned and unnoticed world. For the other, every detail was a jolt. Sheila sat dazed. She looked with new eyes at Prabha. She underlined all those things in herself that were different from what Prabha was. The girl had large eyes in a small oval drawn face. Her sensitive mouth was already pulled down at the corners, but would sometimes, for apparently no or very little reason, clap into a sudden electrifying smile. She looked fragile, almost like a delicate fantasy, among all those broken sordid things. Sheila looked like a wrestler by her side. Robust, with her eyes and skin sparkling with vitamins and a balanced diet. She took Prabha's thin long-fingered hand in her own manicured energetic one. She saw Prabha's nails were bitten down to the quick, and she could not suppress a shudder of revulsion. But she kept holding it, wondering why she had never held her hand before, nor noticed her nails. Shanti had stopped crying and was staring at Sheila with an open mouth from which rivulets ran onto Prabha's shoulder unheeded.

Sheila was the first to force her way through the silence.

"Prabha, if it is at all troublesome for you I can go somewhere else."

"No, no, of course not. Shammy, it is no trouble, how could it be? We are so happy that you are with us, only I am very worried about your mother."

This was the first time that Prabha had used the nickname which the fashionable friends of Sheila used to refer to her, and

Sheila wasn't sure she liked it. Prabha however used it with pride, sounding awkward and ill at ease.

"They don't know at home where you live so they won't be able to find me and come and create a rumpus. In fact, mother won't even imagine that I would come to your place."

"But, Shammy, your parents must be very worried, and they are surely looking for you. You could tell them you are here, my brother could go and give them a letter, I mean he can borrow that bicycle of the people downstairs and give them a letter, no?"

"No, I don't want them to know where I am. I shall never go back to them."

"But why, Shammy? Your mother should not have hit you. But she did that only because she was very angry. She was angry because she was worried about you."

"Don't defend my mother. She is mean and she is a hypocrite. She has no business to treat Solomon like a black slave from Africa."

"I agree. But you know how rigid and narrow our society is. My family won't allow me even to go out alone after dusk."

"But your family is not hypocrites. We say so many high and noble things. But in reality we are worse than you."

"But Shammy, you can't really run away from home. Not for Solomon Kuchiro. And I mean where is Solomon now?"

"I don't know where he is. She must have thrown him out of the house by now."

"You are not in love with him, are you?"

"I don't know. I like him. I admire him. He is the greatest poet of new Africa, do you know?"

Sheila tried to sound very excited.

"Is he in love with you?"

"Very much." Sheila blushed, and her eyes dazzled. "He calls me Your Majesty. Says I look like the Queen of Jhansi. And he has written sheafs of poetry for me."

Prabha smiled, and she suddenly looked pretty.

"It must be great to have a real poet write poems for you, no?"

"It really is, Prabha. Solomon is a most unusual man, almost



like a wild animal, so full of life and vitality. I must bring him to your house one day."

Prabha suddenly looked frightened.

"My parents won't like to see any young man come to visit me here. I can't invite anyone."

"I see. Then, you must meet him at the university."

"I should be very glad to. But Shammy, if you don't go back home, how will you manage to continue at the university?"

Sheila thought for a moment.

"I think I will live in the hostel."

"And you will continue to see Solomon?"

"Of course. He is a great poet. I may even marry him."

Sheila looked and felt like a heroine in a Bombay movie.

"You couldn't do that, Shammy!" Sheila sounded shocked.

"Why not? I have no color prejudice."

"It's not that. Marriage is the most important thing for a girl. Just imagine how many girls have dared to marry out of their caste even. And, to be sure, many of these 'love' marriages turn out to be unhappy. Marriage is more than a personal event, Shammy. It is a social event, and it needs social sanction to stay happy. I mean I can't think of marrying against my parents' consent. In fact, I depend on them entirely."

"I know you do. You are old-fashioned. I don't."

"It's all right if you can find a man in your own caste, your own social circle. But if you go much outside, you take a great risk. How do you know the man will love you and care for you after the first few years?"

"But how do you know the husband your father will find for you will love you and care for you for ever?"

"He will be under a social obligation to take care of me. I will love him because I must. And he will love me because I am his wife."

"As simple as that?"

"Isn't it? I don't know. It's so difficult. I prefer not to think about it."

"I have begun to think that marrying Solomon will be a great adventure."

"Your parents won't accept it."

"I don't expect them to."

"Where will you live? Will Solomon get a good job? Will he be able to give you all the comforts you are used to? And what will happen to your children? Will they be Hindu or Christian? Indian or African? Will you go and live with Solomon in Uganda?"

Sheila's spirit sank. She tried to look cheerful.

"I haven't decided to marry him yet. I may not after all. But I like him very much. And he is a great poet."

"Has he proposed to you?"

"No. But he will."

"You must not act out of impulse, Shammy. It is true times are changing. But not much. I mean, not *so* much."

And she added,

"Are you sure we should not inform your parents."

"Absolutely."

"They will find you wherever you go."

"I will go to the principal tomorrow and ask for a room in the hostel."

"If you don't get one? I mean you will need your parents' permission."

"I will go away to Bombay. To my uncle. I won't bother you after tomorrow."

"Sheila, you are not bothering us. You are my closest friend. I am only worrying for your parents."

Sheila stared around her. Listened to the sounds from the kitchen. Looked all around her. Thought of herself living in this house all her life, looking worn like Prabha, and slowly and invisibly, like the minute hand of a clock, a huge panic opened around her. She could never, never... she felt sick at the thought. She pushed it away with an effort. She said gaily.

"What is this odd smell, Prabha? I hope nothing has caught fire."

"No, it's just the kerosene in the stove. They mix things in it and it smokes a lot, I mean they are always cheating these days."

Sheila got up delicately, holding her sari, and walked round the terrace, kicking away some of the earthenware. "Just wait,

Prabha," she said, "I'll get a job, I can get a job in a shop or something like that, and Solomon can also try to earn, and then we shall go away and travel round the world and he will write books and be famous and I won't see my parents until they beg to see me and Solomon."

"Shammy, you are just dreaming. In India no one does this. I mean, how can you do it? I mean, here and all, everyone is trying to be in the position you are in. I mean that beautiful big house and clothes and your father such an important officer, I mean the whole world is open for you and how can you just throw it away. And, as you said a moment ago, Solomon hasn't even proposed to you."

Sheila looked offended, then insulted. She snatched her hand out of the gentle thin hand of Prabha, and sulked.

"Oh, Sheila, please, don't be angry. I know Solomon loves you, and I am sure he will propose. I was only trying to be realistic. You can't plan without realism. You can't take a plunge in the dark, can you?"

Sheila was somewhat soothed. She asked, "How do you know Solomon loves me? Because I've told you?"

"I can tell by your eyes."

"How?"

"I can. Tell me what happened."

"Well, we were walking. In the garden...and he has this odd way of walking...and very odd way of speaking. He called me Your Majesty...and said I looked like the Rani of Jhansi... just imagine... and his large black eyes were sparkling...and he recited beautiful poetry...all his own, and it was all about love... I am sure he was about to propose...but that old witch Hemlata was keeping a vigil all the time...and so he did not actually ask me, but it was...it was implicit, you know, preordained, inescapable. I just knew he wanted to marry me."

"Eech, Prabha, come here and roll these *chapatis*, Prabha."

"I must go, Sheila. Would you like a magazine or a book?"

"No, thank you."

Sheila sat and stared into the gully. She was so wrapped up in herself that it did not occur to her to go and help with the cooking. She just sat and stared into the gully.

She sat and felt herself creeping into the skin of that old hag sitting under the awning. She scratched with her, spat with her, counted the coins with her thorny fingers. She shriveled up. What was it Prabha had said earlier? That one must accept whatever one has, resign himself to it without passion, that one could not move into another form except in the next life. That it was no good fighting because there were certain things one could not change. I will do it, I will do it, I will... but is it possible not to be frightened? She watched the ants scurrying about on the tarred surface of the terrace. Panic and terror made her lose all hold of herself. Her clouds of fantasy seemed repellent. She was lost in them, and all was strange and nothing solid to touch or hold her. Solomon did not ask me to marry him.

"Will you come and eat now, Sheila? Your food is ready."

"But I don't usually eat at this... I mean what about your family?"

"Oh, we eat at different times, my brothers and sister when they come back from school, and my father when he gets back from work at night, and my mother last of all. So please come. I will get you some water, just wait here."

Prabha poured the water for her while she washed her hands in a corner of the terrace. The soap was only and smelled horrid.

"You will need a cloth to wipe your hands. Just wait here. I'll bring one."

She came back with a towel that looked grey and greasy. Sheila gave it a token touch. Prabha took her into the kitchen. A little wooden board was on the floor, and in front of it a metal plate with several *chapatis* stacked up, a pile of vegetables and a little metal bowl with curds.

"Aren't you going to eat, Prabha?"

"I'll eat later. After Father is back."

Sheila sat down, trying to avoid a pool of water on the floor. Prabha's mother was still squatting near the paraffin stove, baking *chapatis*. Her face was glowing and flushed from the fumes.

"Give your friend some chillies and the mango chutney," she said.

Prabha saw that Sheila's presence had silenced her mother who usually talked all the time.

Sheila ate in silence. She stopped after she had eaten two *chapatis*. Still sitting crosslegged on the floor she licked her fingers. Ram Lal was watching her slyly with sidelong looks from the doorway.

Prabha's mother urged, "You do not find the food tasty, no? Have some more."

"No, thank you. I never eat more than two. It was delicious."

"That is not enough to keep a mouse alive. Give your friend more, Prabha! It is not to your taste, no?"

Prabha's mother did not speak English, nor did she understand it. She would look with pride when her daughter spoke to her friend in English, because she had hardly ever heard Prabha speak English to anyone.

Beetles were moving lethargically in a corner. A host of flies settled on the remains of the food on the metal plate on the floor. The mother gave Sheila water in a brass glass. Sheila got up. She washed her hands on the terrace again and sat down on the bed staring down into the gully.

All afternoon she sat on the bed. The sun flung itself around and the shadows changed. The street noises expanded and were scattered. Stench rose from the gully and Sheila's nausea grew. The oblong patches of sun, the broken earthenware, the rope biting into her thighs obliterated the whole world. The old hag crouched on, turning her back to the world for ten minutes while she gnawed a thick *chapati* with raw onion. Sheila sat and watched.

Prabha tried to talk to her. But her words fell like soot before they reached Sheila. Ants crawled over Sheila's silk sari, over her bare arms. But she did not move. She sat. The mother came out, looked at Sheila, made signs to her daughter and then went in again, dragging Shanti with her. The baby cried, then stopped. Prabha went out to the market, came back. The boys came home, came and looked at Sheila, giggled shyly and disappeared to be fed. The oblong patch of sun seemed to sink. The plant looked as if its leaves and stem were gasping,

and then it seemed to be crying out, it looked as if it cried every afternoon, as if mandibles were pinching its roots. I can't stop them pinching your roots. I can't do anything. There is this ant now. I could squash it with my nail. I could just cut it in half, and watch the acid ooze out. Would it be missed? Millions and millions of ants running about. How did they know where to go? If they found a bit of food did they share it or did they drag it away and hide it and eat it up themselves in secret? She flicked an ant off her arm. It righted itself on the tarred surface and its black head waved about and it came back toward her foot. She lifted her sandal, and brought it down on the ant. She clamped her teeth and then rubbed the sole of her sandal over the black ant, again and again, as if she was stamping out a whole world of unknown fear and darkness, of half known faces and half heard voices. She stopped. Peered down and saw that there was nothing except the tarred black surface. Nothing. Did it scream, the ant? It was never there, there was nothing left. It had never been there.

Sheila sat staring out onto the gully. The air was getting smoky. The sun had almost gone. This was the time she hated most. She tried to think of Solomon, but could only see in his mind shadows of dark trees melting away into the darkening sky. Solomon was the shapeless tree, he was the shadows, he was the gully, he was the old hag, he was the plant that cried every afternoon. He was the bitten nails of Prabha. He was the ant. She sat and stared.

"Come into the room, Shammy. It is getting cold out here."

She shook her head, she sat and stared.

Then she was in the small room. The smell made her sick. It was full of children. Playing with wood in a corner, writing on slates, their noses running, tumbling about. She was sitting on an armless chair against the wall. The mother came and went, carrying bundles of clothes, shouting at the children, shouting Ram Lal, opening and shutting the trunk. A man came in, with bicycle clips round white trousers. He was talking to her, but it was long before she could focus on what he was saying... "...honored we are to have you in our humble abode. Your father is a big man, I trust he is well, and pray God make him

as happy as a prince. You will be staying with us, that is a great honor. But you will find things different here, the arrangements are not very good. But what can we do, our lot is not easy. . .”

A cockroach came out from behind the trunk. It was huge, it ran clumsily across the room.

“You have taken your food, will you take some coffee?”

Was he asking her father to do him a favor? How could she explain she was not ever going to see him again? What was he saying now? She closed her eyes.

Prabha tried to persuade her to eat again. But she said she felt ill and could not. She hardly spoke. She just sat. The yellow bulb in the room was merciless in the details it brought out. She kept on thinking of the pale plant on the terrace. The smoke in the room made her cough. Sometimes she thought she was in a railway station. Then the sole of a sandal would come and rub her out. There would be nothing left. Nothing.

There were just two rooms. The five children slept on the floor, and Prabha slept on the bed with one of the smaller children. In the next room Prabha's parents, and her aunt—who had appeared unnoticed by Sheila—slept. Prabha had given Sheila her bed. There was no mattress. Only a thick cloth that looked like a table-cloth to Sheila, but how could it be, there was no table, they all ate separately on the floor. She lay down fully clothed when she saw the orderly row of bodies and more bodies laid out on the floor. None of them had changed. The light was put out.

She curled up, womb curved. Pulled the table-cloth round herself, and for a moment felt heroic. Then the nightmare of an endless night began. Coughing and spitting from the kitchen next door. Scuttlings across the floor. Prabha was sleeping on the floor beside her. She had tried to persuade Prabha to share the bed with her, but it was a narrow bed and Prabha said the little one would not sleep without her, and Sheila was secretly relieved.

More scuttling. Rats or cockroaches? The rope of the bed cut into her flesh. It was cold. Snoring from next door. Snoring and whistling from the kitchen. Whispering from the floor beside her. Then something bit her. She scratched wildly. She

felt her whole body crawling with things. They were biting her all over. Ants. No, couldn't be ants. Bugs. That was it, bed bugs. She jumped up from the bed and shook herself. She was itching all over. The room was stuffy and cold. She lay down again. Bugs were crawling all over her. She could not see them, but they were boring into her skin. For hours it went on. She got up, shook herself, lay down again, scratched. She was clutched in a terror such as she had never known.

The oblong patch of black sunlight was nailed on her. But it was cold and wet. She tried to pull it off. But another patch was nailed to her at a different angle. Patch after patch was nailed on. And under it myriads of bugs crawled around, biting and sucking her blood. She could not even scratch. She was confined in those cold damp patches. A huge weal where she had been bitten came up on her leg. Her hand reached it and she scratched ferociously. She felt left out and rejected in a dark alien night in a damp cruel alien world. Was she the only one awake? Snoring and whistling from the kitchen. Snoring and grunting from the room next door. Some one farting. From the floor came groans and tiny slurping noises. The tap in the kitchen dripped.

She dozed off. Awoke stiff with cold. And yet her skin was burning. She got up, wrapped the table-cloth around her and went out onto the terrace.

The familiar jackal howl. A dull bulb from a street lamp in the gully. A flap of gunny sacking had been hung across the opening of the awning of the old hag's shop. She was hunched up inside with all her rusted tins. But how could her crooked body fit into such a small space? Even doubled up it looked too small. Surely she could not stretch out. The gully looked all blackness and slime.

She went back and lay down on the bed. It was a relief. She slept for a bit. Haunted by hideous dreams. She awoke. That was a relief.

Dawn filling out with smoke and noise. Stirrings from the kitchen. Her sari was mangled, her hair stuck out in all directions, she could hardly move. Prabha got up, looking bloodless and puffy but with her usual gentle far away look.



"Oh, poor Sheila, you have been bitten. We put the charpoy in the sun, but these late autumn days the sun is not strong enough. The only way is to burn the bed, but even that won't do much good because they are all over the place. I mean, it is an old house and all."

"I want to go outside," Sheila said weakly.

They pulled the bed outside, and Sheila sat down again, gathering enough energy from time to time to look for the swarms of bugs that had turned her into this.

"We are used to it," Prabha said. "But you..." She did not finish her sentence. It was not necessary.

Some of the children were up, some still lying on the floor. They went one by one into the little closet on the side of the terrace, which had no roof, only a slanting door made out of old crates. The stink was unimaginable. Sheila was glad her nose was blocked from a cold. But still she could not face going into that filthy hole. Finally she had to. Sheila came out with a metal glass of tea. It had flakes of the skin of milk, which she hated, but it was hot. She drank it and felt a little better.

Prabha was really worried about her friend now. She refused to talk, she remained seated on the bed, and she looked ghastly. Prabha said, after her father and the children had gone off, she would heat some water on the kerosene stove so that Sheila could have a hot bath. All the inhabitants of the house came to look at her one by one and in groups. Sheila turned her face away from them. The mother came and patted her on the shoulder and put a plate of boiled cereal beside her. Sheila sat and stared through half-closed eyes and made no attempt to eat her breakfast. Prabha lugged some buckets of cold water for her brothers and sisters, her body looked as if it would break like brittle sticks under the weight of the bucket. The aunt had disappeared again. She caught a glimpse of the bicycle clipped legs walking up and down the room inside. She heard voices. Something was being discussed, debated. She was far away from it all.

"I say, Shammy, your hot water is ready. Please have a bath and you will feel better. I will be going out for a little while."

She saw Prabha go quickly down the gully and out of sight. She wanted to get up but could not. Everything looked still,

stagnant, unchanging. She was, her life was caught in this ever-fixed universe. The old hag looked identical to the old hag of yesterday. Anyway she was the same old hag, wasn't she? She would be here a hundred years later. Nothing would ever change in this universe of which she, Sheila Sharma, was now as much a part as the old hag was or Prabha Mani and her mother, and her whining sister, and the sly servant man and the invisible aunt. She, Sheila Sharma, was a mere object in this still universe as much as everybody else was. She had no will. She could not move. She could do nothing.

Sheila sat listlessly on the bed and stared out into the gully. She would rot, but it would take a long time for her to rot completely. She might not even rot, because she did not have the will to rot. Could she, shouldn't she, try and get out of this? She should get up, change her clothes, have a bath perhaps, say thank you very much, and walk down the shaking stairs into the world that lay somewhere mysteriously beyond the gully. She would comb her hair. No, her hands were full of weals and her arms hurt when she lifted them. No, she could not move. She did not have the will. She knew she must move, but she did not have the will. Had she brought her toilet things? What had she brought? Nothing. She had some money. She could change and go out and buy some food she could eat. She would then escape these weak patches of oblong sun. She might escape. She looked in her bag, and found that the little money she had had gone. Perhaps she never had any.

She did not know how long she had been sitting. She was startled when Ram Lal sideled up to her, wiped his nose, spat, and said, "Your lordship, eh... your honoured father has come... in a beautiful big black car... he is asking for you."

She got up, and went down the stairs slowly. Round the corner the large familiar black car was standing. She did not notice the cluster of shrieking children that surrounded the car. She did not notice Prabha, nor her mother, nor her brothers and sisters, nor her father who was standing near the window with his hands folded. She got into the car and sat, huddled in a corner. Prabha brought her suitcase. She said something. Sheila did not hear. The car started.

## THIRTEEN

Peter Kabaku was happy in the village. He had time to think. He was more lonely, and he liked his loneliness. Bhimgarh was a quiet village, like any other Indian village; it woke up only at appointed times for appointed business in appointed manners and styles, and relapsed into its silence. It took Peter Kabaku several weeks to understand the silence of the Indian village, the silence that dominated all the noises of men and animals. And then he saw the difference between Bhimgarh and his own village, which was never silent even if it were quiet. Somehow Peter's mental condition welcomed the silence of Bhimgarh, and he sketched imaginary drawings of life around him. The huts were meticulously clean and remarkably lifeless. The old men sitting under the tree at the crossing of roads, almost blending with the still dry landscape. The women, their faces veiled, the bodies round and shapeless, walking in groups with earthen or brass pots poised on their heads. Only the children were minor exceptions to the rule of silence that governed the village's life.

Even the revolutionary woman fell neatly into the pattern. Peter liked her, for she was part of the village scenario, and she was more. She was memory, dead dreams, fallen hopes. Her past was against her because she could not live in India's present and saw no meaning in its future. She was limbo, and she did not know it. She had her school in the village, a mud hut with two rooms and thirty-three pupils. They came from Bhimgarh and two adjoining villages, came in batches of two or more, at any time between ten and eleven in the morning, and took their lessons from her and another woman whose own education had not gone much beyond the alphabets. And she had her plans. For a dam. For small factories run by electricity. For paved

roads, and co-operative agriculture. For power pumps. Her dreams. Her political ideas were befuddled, she belonged to no party, and although she knew some of the ministers because of her own past and her father's relationship with Gandhi, she would not use her influence to get things done. She would rather quarrel and fight with the officers of the community development project, whom she regarded as unworthy of the tasks of village uplift because they did not believe in the village and had nothing but contempt for it. She knew they hated her for nosing around, and she knew they were afraid of her because of her past, because of what they imagined were her relations with some of the ministers in Delhi. She fought and quarrelled with the villagers and also loved them, and they regarded her with the benign tolerance, ill-concealed contempt and philosophical indifference that characterized the villager's attitude toward the urban do-gooder. She was quite advanced in her age. Peter could never tell the age of Indian women who always turned out to be either much younger or much older than their looks. But she must be forty, if a day. She was quite indifferent to her looks, and she carried the bulk of her shapeless body with the stoid tenacity of a beast of burden. Her breasts, heavy and loose, overflowed her bodice, and the flesh of her waist was coarse and twisted. She was far from an attractive woman. Yet and perhaps because of it, Peter was drawn toward her. She had her charm. She knew no guile. Her frankness was touching. She was an open book, if with a lot of blank pages. She was fussy, irritable, impatient, earnest, honest, kind, and very friendly. Peter liked her. He could be free with her. She would not try to seduce him, and he would not be seduced by her. Besides, she lived in a little dream world of her own, placid and stagnant dreams in a world that was neither today's nor yesterday's, nor tomorrow's. She had no sense of time at all, although she was always in a hurry. She was driven by a force she did not know, and it was often frustrating to question her. To many of his questions she would respond with silence, leaving Peter completely at a loss as to whether she had understood him. To others she would just have no answer.

"Who would believe, seeing you here like this, that you were

once a great revolutionary?" said Peter as they were walking to the block office one afternoon.

She said nothing.

"What makes a revolutionary a reformist, Miss Dutt?" he asked, pursuing his thought.

She just looked at him, and walked on silently.

"Miss Dutt, do you enjoy your work?"

Now she spoke. "What?" she asked.

"Do you enjoy your work?"

"Why should I have to enjoy it?"

"But... I mean if you don't enjoy your work, how do you do it?"

"Because you have to. Because you must."

"Do you like it?"

She did not answer.

"Your silence intrigues me."

"Why should it?"

"Because it fits in."

"With what?"

"With the silence of the village."

"Silence?"

"Indian villages are so silent. Almost lifeless."

"Old."

"You are silent too. You are not old."

"I am. We all are. Every Indian is old."

"I know what you mean."

They walked silently for some time.

"May I ask you a personal question?"

She looked at him sideways.

"Why didn't you get married?"

"Is that any of your business?"

There was acid in her voice.

"No. I am sorry if I asked the wrong question."

She said nothing. Peter was embarrassed and puzzled. They walked silently, and presently approached the block office.

"It won't take me more than five minutes," she said. "Please wait for me in the visitors' room."

"Do you want me to wait?"

"You have no work now. I won't be long."

She walked briskly into the room of the block officer, and Peter could hear her voice from the visitors' room. When she came out fifteen minutes later, her face was flushed.

"No word from Delhi."

"About what?"

"How can you be so forgetful, Mr. Kabaku? About the dam."

"It's not too late yet."

"It's more than two months. I am worried."

"Why?"

"Because the block officer is against me. They are all against me. Nobody wants the dam."

"I do."

"I know."

"Why are you so impatient?"

"If there is no dam, my school will be washed away once again, and that will be the end of it, for they will not build another hut for the school after the flood."

"Do you love your school very much, Miss Dutt?"

"Why should I love it?"

"But you said..."

"What shall I do without the school?"

He understood. She needed the school.

"You could do lots of other things," he said.

"No."

"Why not?"

She did not answer.

"Why didn't you go into politics?"

She looked as if she did not understand the meaning of Peter's words.

"You can go into politics."

She laughed silently.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I know nothing about it."

"But you were a great revolutionary."

She said nothing.

After a few minutes, she spoke.

"Why did you ask that question?"

"Because I think you should go into politics."

"No, not that question. The other one."

"Which one?"

"About my marriage."

"Oh! For no particular reason. I guess I was just curious."

"Because I am dark and ugly."

Peter protested vehemently.

"You are not devoid of charm, Miss Dutt. Your eyes are bright with idealism. Your forehead shows signs of a thoughtful serious person. Your nose bears the mark of dedication. Your chin, of truth. Your cheeks are broad, which shows you are sincere and straightforward. Your eyes are sad and dark, and I think they are beautiful. You are a very charming woman, Miss Dutt."

They were walking along the main village road toward her cottage. The sun was still hot, the sky wore a gray mask of dust and heat, the road was empty except for knots of children stooping aimlessly under the trees. A bullock cart was coming at a distance; the dust it whipped up obscured it from Peter Kabaku's vision, although the creaking noise of the wheels and the smell was now familiar to him. In the dust haze he did not notice that the woman walking by his side had blushed profusely, and was finding it somewhat difficult to hide her embarrassment. And yet she liked the ringing sound of his words because nobody had spoken to her like this before. Her throat burnt and she felt heavy where her breasts struggled against her bodice.

"It's still very hot in daytime," she remarked.

"And very pleasant at night," Peter added.

They walked silently, neither speaking a word. They passed the mudhuts, where lived the poor untouchables, with their own well and their own little brick-and-lime temple. They passed the brick houses, some of them double-storied, all of them built in recent years by peasant landlords who were doing very well with agriculture. Some of these houses had electricity, and Peter could hear tinned Hindi music coming out of a roadside house. It had a radio and its own tubewell, as did several other houses.

"I must speak to Watan Singh," spoke Asha Dutt, more to herself than to Peter. "His son must always keep the radio blaring. And he seldom comes to school."

"Well, he is the son of the president of the village *panchayat*, isn't he?"

"What if? Watan Singh is rich. But that does not mean his son can do whatever he pleases."

"Is it true he owns the entire village?"

"He does. Not in his own name though. He can't, under the land laws. He owns all the land under a score of names, all sons and nephews, some of them never even born."

"And, it goes on."

"It goes on."

"The others don't mind, do they?"

"They do and they don't. You 'see, this is a very old Jat village. All the villagers claim that they are descended from a single ancestor. Watan Singh is a sort of family head. Most villagers work for him. On his fields and in his new cycle parts factory. Those who don't like it move out of the village. Some go to Bhakra where the great dam gives them jobs. Others go to Ludhiana where many new industries are coming up."

"And what happens to the harijans?"

"They live on the outskirts of the village, and are still untouchable, although the law bans its practice. They have their separate well, and they have no land. They work for Watan Singh, on his fields, for wages."

"Do their children come to your school?"

"Very few."

"Do you have trouble with them? Are they untouchable in the school too?"

"Oh no. There can be no untouchability in any public place. The villagers know this, and they are very practical."

The school was at the end of the village, two rooms built in a row, with a brick floor, walls of mud and a roof of thatch. Asha Dutt's own cottage was a single room brick and cement building within the school compound.

As they were about to pass the last house before the school,



Asha Dutt stopped to speak to a woman who was making cowdung cakes and cursing her fate loudly. She was middle-aged, and was wearing a violet colored *salwar* and *kameez*. A piece of half dirty silk was covering her head and part of her face.

"Mother," Asha addressed her in the unusual village fashion, "why doesn't Satish come to school?"

The woman had no time to hear Asha or anyone else. She was angry. As soon as she saw Asha she poured out all her anger. Asha, the school mistress, was to her a representative of the government.

"Now, look at what you have done to us honest clean women. You have given land to the harijans. And now their women will not make cowdung cakes for us any more. And I, a Jat woman, have to dirty my hands every day doing the work of the harijan. Is this the work of a Jat woman?"

"But, mother, no harijan in this village owns any land," Asha said good-humoredly.

"That I don't know. They all behave as if they own all our lands anyway."

"But, surely, mother, you don't want the harijan women to do all the dirty jobs for all time."

"Hey Ram," she invoked her god, "who am I to wish or not to wish? God has ordained that harijans do their work and Jats their own. It is you who are changing the laws of God. And look what you have done to us."

Asha did not pursue the case of another of her truant boys. The mother was in no listening mood. They moved on, and was presently approaching the school compound.

"You seem to have a problem with your pupils," remarked Peter, laughing.

"They just do not want to come to school."

"Why? Don't they like it?"

"Perhaps they don't like their teacher."

There was a cane chair in the school compound, near her hut, and she bade Peter sit down, and went in to make tea. When she came out some fifteen minutes later, she had washed her face, combed her hair, and changed her sari. She carried an aluminium tray in her hands. On it were two cups of tea and some biscuits.

Peter drank the tea which had gone somewhat cold, and he hated drinking cold tea. He munched a biscuit because she insisted. They sat down under the sky, without looking at one another. They had been friends for some time, and the initial inhibitions of being strangers had gone to a great extent. Yet, sitting near her, Peter had the feeling that he knew her but little. He liked it this way, for the distance between them was natural, like the distance between the Indian castes. She was so peaceful, thought Peter, she was as peaceful as the village itself; she never had the commotion called life. Presently she began to tell him about her school, most of which Peter already knew. Her thirty-three pupils came from three villages, and she kept school in the morning because most of the villagers wanted their children to help them in their fields in the afternoons. The illiterate woman who was her assistant teacher was a refugee from Pakistan whose husband had been killed by the Muslims. Few of her pupils stayed in school for more than a year, and few came regularly.

"Still you love your school very much?" Peter said with a short laugh.

"I like children. They are simple. I like to be with them."

"You should have been the mother of several children. You would have been a wonderful mother."

Oh God, he had come back to the same topic. She felt hot again, and there was a funny feeling in her chest.

"I have thirty-three children, Mr. Kabaku," she said with a smile.

"I know. Do they all call you mother?"

"No. They call me masterji."

"How can you be the mother to children who call you masterji?" Peter now enjoyed his joke. "I was thinking of your own children. You should have got married, you know, and have children of your own."

Her breasts were pressing hard against her bodice, and she shifted her position in her chair in an effort to loosen her bodice a bit.

"What's wrong with you today, Mr. Kabaku? You have become very concerned about my marriage."

"Pardon me, if I have said something I shouldn't have. In

fact, I have been very restless for sometime, and I have been thinking of many things I did not think before."

"What things?"

"Oh, many things. I have started doubting if I should have at all come to India?"

"Why? What's the reason of your doubt?"

"Perhaps I only wanted to run away from Kenya because I did not want to get killed. Perhaps I have been selfish in deserting my people at the time of their trials."

"But, Mr. Kabaku, you have been doing Kenya's work in India. You have been building bridges between Africa and Asia."

"I know."

"Then why doubt?"

"Well, I don't really know. Sometime I wonder what bridges I have built. How many friends of Kenya have I made in India? How many of you really feel for Kenya or Africa? And what is bridge-building any way? They are so brittle, these bridges between peoples and nations."

She looked at him in silence.

"I can talk to you freely. You will at least not misunderstand me. I am so afraid at times."

She waited for him to continue.

"I am afraid that I am losing my sense of belonging to Kenya, to Africa. You know, I had a terrible dream about Wachira some months ago. But I don't worry about her as much as I should. I don't seem to miss her as much as I should."

"Perhaps you are just tired."

"Perhaps. Perhaps I am rotting. I seem to have begun doubting the use of non-violence in a political struggle. There is so much violence in all political relationships. And I am sure... not sure any longer that Gandhi means anything very much to Kenya or to Africa. I just don't know."

"You used to say he does."

"I have other doubts too. I have lived for more than two years in free India, and I have lived most of my life in enslaved Kenya. Freedom must be a great thing, but is it enough to just shake off foreign rule? I am told there are a hundred thousand Indians in prison, and they too claim to struggle for

freedom. What happens when the freedom fighter of one day becomes the ruler? Does he use his power differently? Or does power mean the same thing to all people at all time? I just don't know."

"You need power to do good to the people."

"But what I think is good for the people may not be really good? Do I think like a peasant, a worker or like an educated Kikuyu who does not know his own people very well any longer? I have seen many things in India which make me think. I would not like these things to happen in free Kenya."

"What things?"

"Oh, many things. The other day the police in Bombay fired on a crowd of hungry people. Two were killed. I mean I don't quite know for whose freedom we are fighting, and who is my ally and who is not. Do you understand my doubts, Miss Dutt."

"I don't know."

"Freedom does not seem to end our troubles. India and Pakistan fought a war in Kashmir. India and China almost came to war over Tibet. When the Westerners have gone, will we start fighting over our borders, over bits of land? Will we then not be as much imperialists ourselves as the Europeans have been or still are? Will we try to dominate one another? Will China or India wish to dominate Asia? And if either or both are able to dominate Asia, will they not wish to dominate Africa too?"

"Why should you have such ugly thoughts, Mr. Kabaku? You are on a noble mission. You are working for the future of Asia and Africa."

"I know these are ugly thoughts. Miss Dutt, I must go back to Kenya."

"I am sure you will. When your mission is over."

"I must go back now. As soon as I can make it."

"Now? Why? Why should you return now? Is your work in India over?"

"My work—such as it is—can only be in Kenya. I must be with my own people. Die with them if I must, live with them if I can."

"You have become homesick, Mr. Kabaku."

"And, Miss Dutt, I need your help."

"My help?"

"I can't return to Kenya without getting arrested as soon as I set my foot on its soil. There is a warrant of arrest against me. I need a passport for some other African country. May be Morocco or Libya or the Gold Coast. From there I must make my way to Kenya. I have always been a wanderer. Will you help me, Miss Dutt?"

"How could I help you?"

"I know the junior minister of external affairs will not refuse any request from you."

She looked at Peter Kabaku's face, and remembered the face of another man.

"So you want me to use my connections in Delhi to get you a false passport."

"If the Indian government cares for African freedom, for the freedom of Kenya, it will not refuse this small favor. Will you help, Miss Dutt?"

"Is that why you flattered me a little while ago?"

"I flattered you? When? Why should I flatter you?"

"They do when they need my help."

"I see. I thought you were a friend."

"But you have realized, haven't you, that the Indians do not really care for Africa?"

There was iron in her voice. It trembled.

"Well, I am sorry if I hurt you. I did not mean you. I was speaking generally. In fact, I had not spoken my mind to anyone else."

"You did not mean me, I'm sure. Because I have to help you get a passport."

"Miss Dutt, you must not misunderstand me. I don't want your help if you can't give it as a friend. I can surely secure a passport myself. At any rate, I can always return to Kenya.

"But you don't want to get arrested and hanged."

He got up and wiped the perspiration on his forehead with the back of his hand.

"Miss Dutt, I would rather be arrested and hanged in Kenya

than vegetate in India any more. And be assured I do not want your help."

He walked out of the compound with long angry strides, and soon he could be seen no more.

She sat there for a long time looking at the road and wondering why he did not return.

## FOURTEEN

The naked electric light bulb shone in uncensored glory. Insects by the hundred flocked to it, and who knows whether they had been promised more than the light? But there they were dropping dead, one by one, uttering sad little cries, "brother I die, what about you," "I also, I die, my little head is burning with light," "whee, we were promised light by politicians, gods, sages and the electricity board, and now look what's happening ..." ping, another was dead. And still they came, singing arias of joy and ended up in gauzy heaps on the naked verandah floor.

Peter Kabaku stood watching them with a wad of letters in his hand. Three days ago he had returned to New Delhi from Bhingarh a much altered man. His huge melancholy had become huger, and it filled him up with sandheaps of dried tears. Everything around him was grotesquely squalid and too frowsy to be true; he could no longer hew to the line he and his brethren had assigned to him. He was suddenly, desolately tired of going through life in translation, through Gandhi and India and non-violence in translation, and something deep in him cried out for the light even if it meant dropping dead like the insects. He had lived a life of self-inflicted segregation, from his own kith and kin, from Kenya, and he felt nostalgic. Waves of memories welled up in his mind, he felt beaten and defeated. All his powers seemed to atrophy. "I can't go on living a second-hand life, getting incomprehensible doses of experience in translation. I must have a face-to-face encounter with the fires that are raging down villagers in Kenya, the hatred that is burning in hearts white as well as black."

Peter had made up his mind about returning to Kenya. Within hours of his return to New Delhi, he telephoned an official in the external affairs ministry, whom he knew and made

an appointment. Next morning he went to see him. He inquired if the Indian government would help him return to Kenya, and he heard what he had expected to hear. The government, his friend told him, would be sorry to see him leave the country, but if he thought his place was in Kenya, in the midst of his own people, that was his own business. There was nothing the Government could do to help him for it could not assure his safety once he left the Indian shores. Of course he could go back to London from where it might be easier to return to Kenya.

"It won't be. Besides, I don't want to return to Kenya through the kindness of the British."

"I can understand that very well," commented the official. "Of course, you know how we feel for Kenya, even though we do not particularly like the kind of revolution the Mau Mau is trying to work out. And you will also understand that we would not like to offend HMG more than we must."

Of course Peter understood. What he needed was a new passport in which his name is entered as a man born in Uganda or the Gold Coast; he did not expect the British to wait for him at every airport of their African empire. He wasn't that important. He could not expect his friend in the external affairs ministry to oblige him; such things had to be done at a high political level. He remembered Miss Dutt and his heart ached with a bitterness he had hardly known during his long sojourn in India. She could help, if she wanted to. He had regarded her as his only true friend. He could really be endlessly foolish.

Returning to his room in the Constitution House, he found a message from the reception desk saying that a man was waiting to see him at the lounge. Peter walked through the narrow corridor, through the hall and the dining rooms into the lounge, and saw Solomon Kuchiro slumped into a sofa, his legs stretched, a book covering part of his face.

"Solomon! Do you want to see me?"

Solomon jumped up, and stood staring at Peter. His eyes were red, his hair a riot, and his face was ashen.

"Solomon! What's the matter with you? Are you sick?"

"Peter, I have been waiting for you for a whole week."

"I wasn't here. Came back only yesterday."



"Peter, how soon can I leave this country?"

"Leave? Why? Why should you leave?"

"I must. May I leave tonight? Tomorrow?"

"Come on in my room. You are upset. Come on."

Peter heard Solomon's story. Mrs. Sharma had seen her daughter go out in her bicycle when the family was eating lunch, but she had not noticed that Sheila was carrying a small suitcase, and she did not think her daughter could do anything unusual. Solomon had excused himself from lunch and had gone to the university for he wanted to read a lot of African poetry. When he returned to the big house it was almost dinner time, and he sat in his room waiting to be called by one of the servants. On his way back to the house he had stopped at Connaught Place to buy a present for his hosts. When a servant came and told him that the mistress wanted to see him, he was a little surprised, but not very much for he took this to be the servant's own way of telling him that dinner was ready. He entered the living room holding a large brown paper parcel. His face summèred into a broad smile.

His smile faded as Sulochana entered the room. He got up, still holding the parcel in his hand.

"Good evening, Mrs. Sharma," he said, "I have brought you this... I hope you will like..."

He could not finish his sentence. Sulochana stood up and spoke without looking at his face.

"Mr. Kuchiro, I am sorry your visit has to end like this. You must leave our house tonight. You have abused our hospitality. I do not know what to say to you. We were a happy family, and now there is nothing that I..."

She rushed out of the room sobbing.

"I don't know what I have done, Mrs. Sharma," he said looking at her darting out of the room, "I don't understand..." And then he quickly put the brown paper parcel on the table, spun round and ran out of the room. His chest and throat felt clogged with sharp bits of broken glass.

He packed his suitcase. He wiped his nose on the sleeve of his slate-colored pullover. He walked out of the house, carrying his suitcase, his eyes fixed on the tips of his battered suede shoes.

Peter Kabaku listened to Solomon's story in brooding, encircling silence.

Solomon stopped. He closed his eyes.

Peter Kabaku felt very very tired. The world seemed to him to have gone hopelessly mad.

The following day came the news of the destruction of his village.

Peter had not had a letter from Kenya for two months. He knew from newspaper reports that the situation in the Nairobi area was pretty bad. He had asked Wachira to leave Nairobi and go back to his village, but he had had no news confirming that she had received his letter and left Nairobi. The morning mail brought a copy of the *Nairobi Star* three weeks old. In just ten words it told Peter that his village was one of the "several" that had been burnt by the Mau Mau! As he read the paragraph over and over again he was horrified with his utter lack of feeling. He felt nothing. The faces of Wachira, his children, his father, many other faces floated on the yellow newsprint and there was no feeling in him, nothing. He felt like a stranger in a strange world reading a strange story about some strange people in a strange land going through a strange experience. He felt nothing.

Now, three hours and thirtyseven minutes later, Peter Kabaku stood watching the insects flock toward the naked electric light bulb. He had a wad of letters in his hand, letters that came in the day's mail but had remained unread. He had gone out to meet a member of the Indian parliament, a very articulate champion of African independence, and had returned to his room with some assurance of help. Peter looked at the naked bulb and wondered. What powerful forces were acting behind this destruction—of the insects, of Kenya, of his village, of the love of Solomon Kuchiro, the happiness of the Sharmas! Was it that death and destruction had become fashionable?

He sat down on his bed and kept watching the insects. There was a big light burning, a big fire, somewhere, everywhere, and he was strongly drawn toward it like those insects. He saw before his eyes thousands of flames devouring countless men and women and children and innumerable homes and villages

and cities. Among them he saw Wachira, his son Ngatha and his daughter, his father, his mother and step-mothers and all his brothers and sisters, all the men and women and children of his village, and all the men and women of Kenya he knew and he did not know. He saw lines upon lines of white men and white women leaping into the fire and disappearing into its flames. He wanted to cry, but his eyes were burning sand and there were a hundred pieces of broken glass in his throat. He was an outcast in a whizzing swirling world rushing in blind fury toward its own destruction. He had no past, no present, no future, no name, no motherland, he wasn't alive. Peter wanted to die. That was the only thing men of honor could do. To die. Anything else was too much for any man, most of all to live. Peter wanted to die for Kenya's freedom, just as Wachira must have died, and many others too. He was not equal to the task of living for Kenya's freedom. Gandhi should have died before India became free. At least he died soon after. It is so much the better to die fighting for freedom than to have to live after freedom has been won. What do you do with your emancipation after you have got it? What have the Indians shown? Why has Solomon Kuchiro to leave India with his bleeding wounds of love? What will the Kenyans do with their emancipation?

He was rescued from his death wish by a knock on the door. He waited for a second knock, secretly relieved by the intervention of the living world. The second knock came in a moment, timid but undeniable. He went and opened the door, and stood there, dumb founded.

"You?" he said, surprised at the eloquence of his own voice.

"Me," said Asha Dutt, not to be outdone.

"You, here? So late at night?"

"Yes."

"Are you alone?"

"Did I ever have a companion?" she replied, trying a smile which made her day's living more visible on her face and clothes.

"Then how will you return? Where are you staying?"

"You are a strange host. Not even asked me in and now you are asking me to go?"

"You are a strange girl," he said with shy boldness. "Don't

you know it is not quite safe for a single girl to come to my room at night? And this place has a million tongues and ten million eyes."

"I think I shall sit down first and then consider how dangerous you are and how many tongues and eyes are there in this place."

"Come on in. It's really good to see you." He spoke the truth and she knew it.

She sat in the armchair.

"Have you got any water in your room? I am thirsty."

"Have you eaten your supper?"

"May I have a glass of water?"

He saw that his room was terribly untidy, and he began to feel ashamed.

She drank her glass of water, and said, "Don't think for a minute that I am going to clean up your room. Only heroines in cheap novels do that—they are all the time cleaning up their boy friends' rooms." She wanted to be light and say trivial things, but could not. Neither of them was made for light and trivial things. An awkward silence descended on both of them, stood between them. She was the first to break it.

"How many days since you returned to Delhi?" she asked.

"Today's the third day, I guess. Or the fourth."

"You don't look very well."

"I'm all right."

Silence again, until Peter said,

"You look rather tired."

"It has been a long day."

"Have you had any supper?"

"Oh, don't try to be fatherly. I'm not very used to this kind of administration. Besides, I go without supper quite often at night." She added with a smile, "Even then I grow fatter and fatter."

"How is the school?"

"As always."

"Any news about the dam?"

"No."

"Are you going to see Mr. Sharma?"

"Not this time. Perhaps later."

They ran out of small talk.

"When did you arrive?"

"In the morning."

"And what have you been doing all day?"

"I've been busy," she said, trying to be mysterious.

"That's evident. You look tired."

"I have news for you. You will get your passport."

He leaped on his feet in a sudden jerk of life. His face lit up with a smile.

She was put off. However, she felt important.

"You should see the deputy minister in the ministry. He knows about you. You can be frank with him. He'll help you. In fact, if you can see him tomorrow, you should get your passport in a week, perhaps two."

In his happiness, he took both her hands into his, and held them.

"It's a great thing you have done for me. How can I thank you?"

"You don't have to." Now that she had nothing more to add to her mystery and her importance, her spirit sagged, and she felt cheated.

She slowly released her hands from his.

"It's nothing. What I've done is not for you. But for your cause. For the future of Africa, and of Asia."

She tried to speak these words with some force. But her voice sounded feeble. She felt very tired.

After a moment of silence, she said, "Or perhaps I have just done something for a friend."

Peter shouted generously, "You're my best friend in India. I will never forget you. Never."

"You seem to be very happy. You are very anxious to go home."

"Yes, I am. My village has been destroyed. Burnt down."

"What did you say?"

"My village has been burnt down."

"By whom? How do you know?"

"The newspaper says by the Mau Mau. That's a lie. By the British no doubt."

"How do you know? Has Wachira written? Are they all safe?"

"I don't have the faintest idea. I got the news in a Nairobi paper. An old issue. Some weeks old. Came this morning from London."

"What's happened to your people? Your parents? Your children?"

"I don't know. I wrote to Wachira that she should go and live in the village. That's because the Nairobi area was very disturbed. I don't know if she got the letter or what she did and I don't know where she and the kids are. My parents must have been in the village. They have either escaped or died in the fire."

He said this with a coldness that frightened Asha Dutt. His voice was dry, and he spoke as if he was telling somebody else's story. He was not in it, no part of it.

Peter went on, "You must be shocked to find me so cold. I am shocked myself. I cannot believe my people have all perished and there is nothing left of my village. It cannot be true. And yet many things that cannot be true do happen. And what happens cannot be false."

She noticed the photograph of Wachira on the table, very indistinct because of a layer of dust and a fortress of books around it. She got up, her heart was heavy, and she was breathing heavily. She went and dusted the photograph. Removed the books, looking carefully at the titles. Then she went to Peter Kabaku, her dusty damp hand darted out and settled on his forehead. She cried.

It is the sight of her tears that broke him down. He put his head on her heaving bosom, and sobbed.

She had never felt closer to a man in all her life. And yet she knew the man whose head rested on her warm bosom was far, very far from her.

## ***FIFTEEN***

For the next few days she was busy arranging for Peter Kabaku's departure from India. She went about the job with efficiency and with a nagging unwillingness. Again and again her placidity would desert her, and she would lose her temper with the petty and not-so-petty officials she had to see. She cajoled, she pleaded, she flattered, she threatened. Peter went about with her, impassive, determined, oblivious of the increased intensity of the stares which were drawn by the unique treat of an African Negro and an Indian woman going about too much together.

Peter had not felt lighter for years. The unbearable burden of knowing was no more. He was now going to do, to act. If action meant death, it mattered little. He felt a strong impulse to pour out all of his suppressed responses to India. He talked a great deal; in fact, whenever they were together, he did almost all the talking. She listened, fighting a deepening depression. She looked at him, and her vision was laced with longitudes and latitudes, with routes to and from Africa, with gold and ivory coasts, long boats like millipedes on their backs, wagons with wheels like nose rings, bands of guerrillas hiding behind scant bushes, maps flowering into mountains and oceans and saharas. Ignorant of how her mind was working, he was delighted in having a good listener, was glad to be able to speak without inhibition. He suddenly found courage to be publicly honest with himself, to be even banal.

He had learned very little about India, he told her, because India had not opened up, and he was rejected at every step. India had been publicly kind, and privately rude. He had heard a lot of noble words, not seen many noble deeds. Most of the Indians he had met in Delhi were hypocrites, they knew nothing of how to match words with action. Indians were obviously great

talkers and prolific writers; if only they believed in action! He had been horrified at their inability to see the wrongs of their actions. He told her the story of Solomon Kuchiro, and was surprised that she had no comment to make.

"Don't you think they were grossly unfair to him?"

"Who?"

"Why! The Sharmas, of course."

"I don't know. It's very difficult to determine who is unfair to whom. Perhaps we are all unfair to each other. All of us, everywhere."

"You evidently do not approve of Solomon's falling in love with Sheila. Nor do I. But these things, as we all know, are not dictated by reason. I mean one can't help falling in love, can one?"

"I guess not," she said, almost to herself.

"You know, Mr. Sharma wanted to see me. When I was in his office, he placed all the blame on Solomon. Even suggested black magic. He asked me whether Solomon should not consider transfer to another university, outside Delhi. He said he might help him get transfer to a good university."

"It might be good for both of them," she said.

"But Mr. Sharma wasn't concerned with Solomon's welfare. His only concern was his daughter."

"You may be unfair to him."

"Perhaps I am. I don't care. You can't be fair to everyone. Can you?"

"It's difficult. One must try, though."

"Nonsense. You can't be fair to yourself as well as to those who are against you. Take your own case."

"My case? Why pick on me?"

"You have been fair to a lot of people, and grossly unfair to yourself."

"Oh, really?" She tried to smile. "I didn't realize that."

"I don't think your real place is in India! You are a revolutionary. You almost killed a British Governor. There's no revolution in India. India believes in arrangement. You arranged your independence with the British. You are now arranging things at home and abroad. I have seen no revolutionary fire



burning anywhere in India, only a spark here and there in certain people."

"I, one of them."

"A little more than most others, perhaps. I don't know. Frankly, I hardly know you. We have been friends for... how long? Several years. But what do I know about you?"

"Everything."

"You can't deceive me any more. I know something of your formal life. You are kind, helpful, understanding and so on. I know nothing of your personal life. What goes on inside you."

She closed her eyes, and tightened her lips. And then she spoke, "Nothing."

In about ten days everything was fixed up. Peter Kabaku was leaving. Asha Dutt took care of almost everything. All the time going through her first mental crisis in life. She did not understand why this man came and why he was going away. At times he seemed real, the only real thing around her; and then he faded away into the general fog that life had been for her all these many many years. She envied him, she was angry with him, she rejected him as a reality, and she wanted to be with him as long as she could. She envied him the death of his wife and children and the knowledge that he would go and rip the guts of men who had no particular connection with a particular death or death in general. She resented the emptiness that was growing with her, each day it was larger. She resented the grill through which she had now begun to see things, the stifling safety, the drabness of doing good, where there was no feeling.

The pity she felt made her an immovable part of the landscape in which she pitied.

She wanted a body that could run and feel, that loved to touch and be touched. Sitting with Peter or walking by his side, she watched his muscular body with a longing that horrified her. She had all kinds of dreams in her sleep, which she could not remember at all. Except that they were vulgar, which left her with a sense of shame and vague pleasure.

Sitting in front of Peter in an evening or at night, listening to his light-hearted words, his noisy laughter, a fear would form somewhere in the depths of her mind that he was going to grab

her, molest her, assault her, even kill her. Her body went numb, a sweat ran through her bulky breasts. He did nothing of the sort, but went on spinning words and images that hardly reached her, and she looked at him like a child abandoned by the roadside.

She did not give up, entirely. In her mind she tried most of the time to be lyrical of the time they had spent together in the village. She framed it as a idyll. She could not speak to him about it, but she knew that if ever she had her dam in Bhingarh, she would name it the Kabaku Dam. For it was he, and not she, who had conceived of the idea of the dam. It was his dam, really.

It was a very different evening from the one when Peter Kabaku had arrived in Delhi by rail from Bombay nearly three years ago. New Delhi was a much smaller railway station, much cleaner, and quite modern. Only a few trains started from it, and the crowds were never very big. A group of friends, Africans and Indians, stood on the platform. They garlanded Peter Kabaku. There was a lot of hand-shaking, of embracing. Many kind words spoken with an abundance of accents and idioms. She watched it all. She bobbed up and down on small feet, her face lined with anxiety. Peter Kabaku was going round to each of his friends and shaking them by the hand, thumping them on their backs, talking to them, animated, full of pent up steam. He had a Gandhi cap on his shaven head. He was drawn again and again toward her, wanting to be near her, feeling a need and despair in her, but he was frightened to go to her with all these people around, fearing she might be humiliated or embarrassed.

The green signal. The guard whistling. All those people milling around. Swirls of them. She came up to him, her eyes lowered. Her lips were trembling and she had some dried food round the edges. She put a book in his hands—a copy of Tagore's *Collected Poems*. She held on to one of his hands. Her hand was clammy and cold.

The train began to move. Peter Kabaku looked at her, his Gandhi cap askew, and in front of all these gossiping, shocked eddies of people, he hugged her, as he had Old Flory. He let her go with a jerk, and sprinted after the train and jumped on,

waved, and people moved around and waved, hands, handkerchiefs, petals of flowers, newspapers and the *Time* magazine. Like a sudden blizzard of snow the whole scene was obscured. There was the stillness of snow, unmarked, devoid of all possibilities.

She lowered her body, opened her mouth wide, and began to run after the train. She knocked into a navyblue porter, walls of figures blocked her way. She tried to squeeze through them, she tried to knock them over. She managed to jostle a few, her hairpins fell out, her bun came undone, and then she tripped over her small feet, and fell down.

## ***EPILOGUE***

The scene, flat as a backdrop, is the village hut. Lamp-light, lime, cowdung, a jug of tea, unfinished sewing, and an open book, Tagore. A translation. O, and Miss Dutt. And India in translation. In transition.

There is, of course, a huge past, a present of hastening slowly, and a future of together separately. The mystique of the birth of a new nation, of the awakening of a human mass, the charisma of emancipation. And the drab drama of nation-building. An epic one would have given one's soul to write, if it ever could be written.

The wheels of history grinding but slothfully. If history is the record of the conscious, here, in this lamp-lit earthy world, it is a record that must wait for a long time to be read with adequate meaning. For the present, it is a record of dreams and ideals and the cruelty that is hidden behind all idealisms. Fantasies, evolutionary or revolutionary. For the present, it is the unwritten story of a gigantic mass unconscious. Of men and women living in societies within societies, cut off from the larger life around them, cut off therefore also from the cultural inheritance of the past, for the past drives its meaning from being consciously shared.

From the railway station Miss Dutt returned to the village of Bhingarh. To a fragment of a society in transition to the old stale prose of life in translation. She lived, or so did it appear to herself and many others. In the morning she went to her school, in the afternoon, to villager's homes to inquire why their sons and daughters did not turn up in their classes. Sometimes she walked to the block office to quarrel with the community project officers over the delay in sanctioning her dam pro-

ject. It was, of course, never sanctioned, for her scheme was unscientific, uneconomic, wasteful, and no powerful politician not even her friends in the cabinet were really interested in the village. But the floods did not come for two years and so the school stood. Once in a while she went to New Delhi to help someone to get some patronage. She seldom spent the night in the city. She discovered that she could not sleep away from the village.

This was, however, only one part of her life. There was a richer, deeper, larger part in which she was the queen of all she surveyed. It was a world of lofty visions. Of a man, of ideals, of idealisms, of glamorous death and glorious life. The man was Peter Kabaku. He was battling his way through jungles, deserts, bogs, lakes, ambushes, and custom officials to join the forces of revolution. Kabaku braving dangers, hazard-ing hazards, slaying obstacles, bound for his sacred motherland, stroking the hard cover of his volume of Tagore while waiting for mighty surging rivers to abate. Kabaku, head bowed, heading toward his village, brushing aside the tails of lions, snarling back at cheetahs and shaking hands with gorillas—his heroism unsung, no panegyrics, no snap shots. Thus he travels in do-it-yourself-kit, his feet blistered, flashes of his past life molesting him like mosquitoes, gnats, nits. He stops all of a sudden, disturbing the rhythm of travel. He falls on his knees amidst the foliage. He wants to shout a name. It sticks at his throat, and refuses to come out. Kabaku rises, and with a tragic stance, his arms hanging uselessly by his side, continues his arduous journey across the wastes of a continent, the wastes of centuries. He emerges from the jungle. He finds his supper in a village. He mounts a rostrum and talks to his people. He is garlanded. And having baptized the soldiers of emancipation in the fire of his faith, he moves on, clasping firmly his volume of Tagore.

He wants to think of his wife, his children, his father and his mother. He cannot. He can think only of Africa, and its mother continent, Asia. Africa of 'copper sun or scarlet sea, jungle star or jungle track, strong bronzed men or regal black.' And Asia, the ancient, the eternal. And somewhere in Asia, a cottage of lamplight under a starlit sky, the night breeze whis-

pering eternal silence to the ears of unripen wheat, a cottage of lamplight, lime, cowdung and a jug of tea.

He fights his way to his village only to find it raged to the ground, burned to charcoal, to charred bones. His eyes look for a moment for his wife, his children, his kith and skin. But only for a moment. He is now a victim of cosmic indifference and human difference. His courage is challenged by what he sees all around him—graveyards of futility, bleached bones of Nairobi, soft buds of Rose ashby's mouth, plateaus, estuaries, and arid valleys filled with skeletons. Seas of ruined civilizations, columns standing to the sun, while birds of ill omen flit over eerie landscapes, making eerie things eerier still.

No, his courage does not collapse. For Peter Kabaku is the modern Memnon of ancient Ethiopia "in whose soul alone, Ulysses viewed an image of his own." He is the wanderer in the endless steppes of history, carrying the ever-burning torch of freedom. He stretches out his hands to god, and moves on, valiant, lonely, with not even organized religion to help him. He trudges wearily on, now on his feet, now on his belly. Disasters cover him with their scaly droppings, he is hacking the pioneer's path for the future. For skyscrapers to black glory, when white men will sit on aluminum chairs in asbestos-lined rooms, and behind locked rooms—to resemble their black and brown lards and masters .

Kabaku joins a wandering band with stolen guns. They chew the tapioca roots, and their beautiful white teeth shine like beacons for their fellow men.

Now Kabaku is alone, again alone. He is no longer visible except in silhouette. He is in a landscape—symbolic in shades of grey—of cliffs. The cliffs are calcified. The landscape is bare. The lines are horizontal, sky and cliff. The only vertical line is the battling Kabaku, a tiny figure, struggling on, black as pitch, black as golden light, blacker and brighter than anything else in existence.

Kabaku is joined by other figures resembling him. The lines are horizontal, curving upward at an infinitesimal angle, signifying dreams and hopes, denoting struggle. Numberless figures join him—all the uhurus and swarajes and ko-ming yüs, all the

bloody revolutions and ahimsas and mao-maus, all in silhouette against the luminous sky while the ever-increasing procession struggles on toward it. The long procession winds along the cliffed face. It now spans oceans and continents, black, brown, yellow, all in silhouette, together, separately, together. . .

And there appearing slowly, dimly, is a barrel-like silhouette rolling along small feet, waiting for the procession to liberate it from its insignificance, waiting, meanwhile, in an Indian village, in countless villages in three continents, waiting in huts of lamp-light, some light, any light. . .





